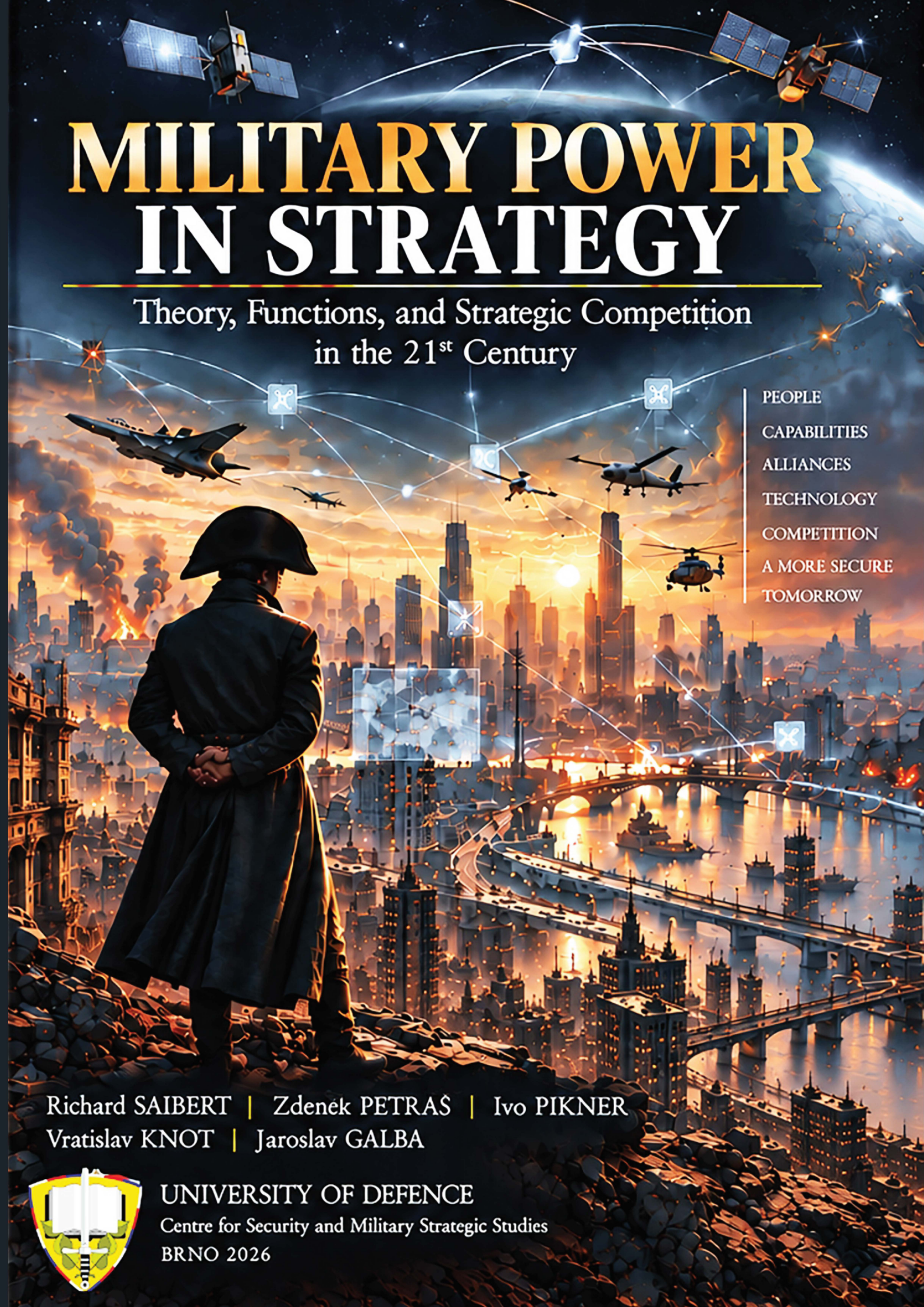




MILITARY POWER IN STRATEGY

Theory, Functions, and Strategic Competition
in the 21st Century

PEOPLE
CAPABILITIES
ALLIANCES
TECHNOLOGY
COMPETITION
A MORE SECURE
TOMORROW

Richard SAIBERT | Zdeněk PETRAŠ | Ivo PIKNER
Vratislav KNOT | Jaroslav GALBA



UNIVERSITY OF DEFENCE

Centre for Security and Military Strategic Studies
BRNO 2026

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Theory, Functions, and Strategic Competition in the 21st Century

Richard SAIBERT, Zdenek PETRAS, Ivo PIKNER, Vratislav KNOT, Jaroslav GALBA

BRNO 2026

Authors:

Richard Saibert, PhD. (LTC ret.) graduated from the Military University in Vyškov (1991) and the University of Defence in Brno (2019). In addition to command and staff positions in the Czech Armed Forces (CAF), he addressed issues related to national defence and served in the Czech delegations to NATO and the UN. In the civilian sector, he gained experience in project management and public procurement. He currently works as a researcher at the Centre for Security and Military Strategic Studies, University of Defence. He publishes articles on training military personnel in operations planning, lessons learned in the CAF, and doctrine development.

Ivo Pikner, Associate Professor, Ph.D., (COL ret.) is a research assistant at the Department of Military Theory, Faculty of Military Leadership of the University of Defence in Brno. He served in the army at various command and staff positions. In 2008, he received his PhD in the field of Defence Management for his dissertation about "Weapon Systems of Land Forces in Future Operations." Later in 2017 he defended his habilitation with topic „Development of Operating Concepts in the Armed Forces.” After 38 years of service, he retired in 2019 in rank of Colonel from position of Dean of the Faculty of Military Leadership. He dealt with defence research projects and he was involved in the creation of conceptual documents focusing on the future use of the Armed Forces in Joint Operations such as the Operating Concept of the Czech Armed Forces, Military Strategy, Concept Development of Command and Control. He is specialized in the character and tendencies of development in military affairs and defence planning focused on future capability development. He is also dealing with the use of armed forces in present and future operations.

Zdenek Petras, PhD. (COL ret.) graduated from the Military College of Land Forces in Vyskov (CZE). In 2008, he completed a master's degree at the Université Panthéon-Assas Paris II, in defence industry dynamics. In 2016, he obtained a PhD. degree in economics and management program at the University of Defence Brno (CZE), specialising in military capability assessment. After several years as a staff officer at the General Staff of the Czech Forces and in NATO and EU military structures, he currently works as a research fellow at the Centre for Security and Military Strategic Studies. He is systematically engaged in issues related to military strategy, defence planning and capability development. He is the author of several articles and publications on these topics.

Vratislav Knot, MSc. (LTC) graduated from the University of Defence in Brno in 2008. He has held various command and staff positions in the Czech Armed Forces (CAF) and participated in international operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. He currently works as a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Security and Military Strategic Studies, University of Defence. His professional interests focus on operational- and strategic-level planning, military art, Multi-Domain Operations (MDO), and the education and training of senior military officers. He is involved in teaching and coordinating courses on operational-level planning and Military Art. His research and publication activities focus on lessons learned, operational planning, and the integration of MDO into planning.

Jaroslav Galba graduated from the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, with a bachelor's degree in media studies and journalism and security and strategic studies (2020) and a master's degree in security and strategic studies (2022). He currently works as a researcher at the Centre for Security and Military Strategic Studies, University of Defence. His research focuses on armed conflicts, unmanned systems, and the use of wargaming in military education.

MILITARY POWER IN STRATEGY

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The monograph underwent a standard peer-review process, and the Editorial Board of the Centre for Security and Military Strategic Studies of the University of Defence recommended it for publication.

The monograph *Military Power in Strategy* aims to:

- To provide a systematic examination of military power as a strategic phenomenon.
- To develop a coherent analytical model capable of explaining how military power functions as a strategic instrument within contemporary systems of national and international power.
- To examine military power through separate analytical perspectives while providing limited integration across its structural foundations, strategic use of military power, and broader political context.
- To contribute to both academic scholarship and professional strategic practice by integrating insights from strategic theory, military history, international relations, and contemporary security studies.

Reviewers:

MG. Miloslav Lafek

COL (GS) Assoc. Prof. Vladan Holcner, Ph.D.

AI DISCLOSURE

The authors disclose the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI) as a supporting tool in the preparation of this book. It was used to support the development and refinement of selected methodological and analytical elements and to assist in developing the visual concept and graphic design of the book cover.

AI was used as an auxiliary tool and did not replace the authors' scholarly work, analytical reasoning, interpretation, or academic judgment. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed and, where appropriate, revised by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final form of the book.

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DEDICATION



This book would never have taken the form you now hold without the significant contribution of our colleague and, above all, our friend, Dr Ján Spišák, whom we sadly lost during its preparation. It is difficult for us to come to terms with the fact that he is no longer with us, yet we are deeply grateful for the opportunity to share with him not only our professional journey, but also our shared enthusiasm for the field that brought us together.

His contribution to this book was fundamental. He was the one who brought new perspectives, raised important questions, and tirelessly sought connections others might have overlooked. Every chapter bears the imprint of his thinking, his thoroughness, and his natural curiosity. He had a gift for asking the right questions and refusing to settle for simple answers, thereby advancing not only this book but also all of us around him. Through his work, he made a lasting contribution to the advancement of knowledge in areas such as strategic thinking, operational planning, and the theory of the centre of gravity, and his professional influence extended far beyond our institution, as evidenced by his numerous publications and scholarly articles.

For him, the study of the military art was not merely a professional specialisation. It was a lifelong interest and passion that accompanied him every day. He devoted his time, energy, and attention to it down to the smallest detail, often at the expense of his own comfort. Discussions with him were always inspiring, sometimes passionate, but never empty. He had a remarkable ability to make others think, to question what they had previously taken for granted, and to search for answers even where they might at first have seemed obvious.

We therefore dedicate this book to his memory. It is our honour to publish it and, in this way, to continue, at least in part, his work and legacy. This book contains more than what we have written together. It also carries a part of his work, his way of thinking, the questions he asked, and the enthusiasm with which he devoted himself to the military art. We believe this is what will remain in these pages forever

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PREFACE

The relationship between strategy and military power has occupied a central position in political and strategic thought throughout history. From classical reflections on war and statecraft to contemporary debates on international security, scholars and practitioners have sought to understand how military force can be organised, employed, and integrated into the pursuit of political objectives. Yet despite centuries of study, the role of military power within strategy remains increasingly difficult to conceptualise in the contemporary strategic environment.

The twenty-first century is characterised by renewed great-power competition, rapid technological innovation, multidomain interaction, and the growing interdependence of military and non-military instruments of statecraft. Military power now operates within a strategic environment that extends beyond traditional conceptions of war and peace, encompassing deterrence, strategic competition, crisis management, coercion, alliance politics, and persistent rivalry below the threshold of armed conflict. These developments have expanded the strategic relevance of military power while simultaneously increasing the complexity of its analysis.

Although military power remains one of the most extensively studied subjects within strategic studies, international relations, military theory, and security studies, existing scholarship frequently examines individual aspects of military power in relative isolation. Scholars have made significant contributions to the study of deterrence, coercion, military effectiveness, force development, technological innovation, alliance behaviour, and strategic competition. However, these perspectives often remain analytically fragmented and provide only limited integration of how military power is generated, employed, and translated into strategic outcomes.

This book is motivated by the need to address this analytical fragmentation. Its central purpose is to examine military power as a core instrument of strategy and to provide a comprehensive understanding of how military capabilities generate strategic influence, support political objectives, and shape outcomes within contemporary national and international power systems.

The book argues that military power cannot be adequately understood through material capabilities alone. Its strategic significance emerges from the interaction of political authority, institutional and organisational structures, technological and human resources, strategic employment, and broader political, societal, and geopolitical conditions. Military power is therefore best understood as a multidimensional strategic phenomenon rather than merely as an aggregation of forces, platforms, or defence expenditures.

The principal scientific contribution of the study is the development of an original analytical model of military power consisting of three interconnected dimensions: structural, functional, and strategic. The structural dimension concerns the foundations from which military power derives its potential; the functional dimension addresses how this potential is employed for strategic purposes; and the strategic dimension concerns the broader context within which military power generates effects and political consequences. Military effectiveness connects these dimensions by determining the extent to which available potential can be translated into usable capability and strategically relevant outcomes.

The book follows this analytical logic. It moves from the conceptual and theoretical foundations of strategy and power, through the characteristics, foundations, strategic uses, and effectiveness of military power, towards its multidomain, civil–military, technological, and future strategic dimensions. The concluding chapter then synthesises these findings and returns to the research questions and the analytical model developed by the study.

The book's scope is deliberately broad yet analytically focused. The study concentrates primarily on the role of military power at the level of states and formal military institutions. Although the book examines irregular warfare, hybrid threats, non-state actors, and emerging technologies where relevant, it remains focused on military power as a strategic instrument of statecraft. Historical examples appear throughout the analysis not to provide a comprehensive history of warfare, but to offer strategic insight and analytical understanding.

By integrating insights from strategic theory, military history, international relations, and contemporary security studies, the book seeks to contribute to both academic scholarship and professional strategic practice. Its purpose is ultimately to provide a coherent analytical model for understanding how military power is generated, employed, and translated into strategic effects in an increasingly complex and contested international environment.

The views expressed in this book are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official policy, position, or views of the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic or any other governmental institution.

1. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to develop an original analytical model capable of explaining how military power functions as an instrument of strategy within contemporary systems of national and international power. The research is motivated by the observation that existing scholarship frequently examines military power through separate perspectives, including military capability, military effectiveness, deterrence, coercion, technology, institutional development, and strategic competition, while providing more limited integration of these perspectives into a coherent explanation of how military power is generated, employed, and translated into strategic outcomes.

The study therefore combines conceptual analysis, theoretical synthesis, historical-comparative inquiry, and doctrinal and institutional analysis. These methodological components are used as complementary sources of analytical insight and provide the basis for developing an original analytical model of military power consisting of three interconnected dimensions: structural, functional, and strategic.

The methodological objective is consequently theory building rather than hypothesis testing. The study seeks to identify and organise the concepts, relationships, mechanisms, and contextual conditions through which military power acquires strategic significance.

1.1. Research Design and Analytical Approach

The study adopts a qualitative theory-building research design. Rather than testing a specific hypothesis, the research seeks to identify, organise, and synthesise concepts, theories, historical experience, and contemporary strategic practice into an integrated explanatory model. Methodologically, the study follows the social-science tradition of theory construction, where explanatory concepts and models may be developed through conceptual refinement, abstraction, comparison, and synthesis of existing knowledge (Merton 1968; Waltz 1979).

The objective is not merely descriptive. The research seeks to explain how military power is generated, how it is employed, how it produces strategic effects, and under what conditions it influences political outcomes. Consistent with Waltz (1979) and Goertz (2006), the study therefore moves beyond examining individual variables and focuses on relationships among the principal dimensions of military power.

The research is interdisciplinary, situated at the intersection of strategic studies, military theory, international relations, security studies, political science, and military history. This orientation reflects the multidimensional character of military power and the need to consider material, institutional, organisational, political, societal, technological, and strategic factors within a common analytical perspective.

1.2. Research Questions

The study is guided by one overarching research question and five supporting research questions. Together, they provide the analytical structure for examining the foundations, strategic uses, effectiveness, and contemporary transformation of military power and for developing the proposed analytical model.

Primary Research Question

How does military power function as an instrument of strategy in contemporary systems of national and international power?

Supporting Research Questions

RQ1. What structural foundations enable military power to generate and sustain strategic capability and influence?

RQ2. What forms of strategic use enable military power to influence political behaviour and achieve strategic objectives across the competition continuum?

RQ3. What factors determine how effectively military power translates military capabilities into strategic outcomes?

RQ4. How do strategic competition, multidomain interaction, and technological change affect the role and effectiveness of military power?

RQ5. How can these relationships be integrated into a coherent analytical model for understanding military power in the twenty-first century?

The questions are analytically interconnected. RQ1 addresses the foundations of military power; RQ2 examines its strategic employment; RQ3 addresses the conditions determining its effectiveness; RQ4 places these relationships within the changing strategic environment; and RQ5 integrates the findings into the analytical model.

1.3. Conceptual Analysis

The first methodological pillar is conceptual analysis. Concepts constitute the foundation of theoretical inquiry because the explanatory value of theoretical arguments depends upon the clarity and consistency of the concepts from which they are constructed. As Sartori argues, conceptual ambiguity weakens theoretical explanation by blurring analytical boundaries and undermining comparability (Sartori 1970; 1984).

The study therefore examines core concepts including strategy, power, military power, military force, deterrence, coercion, military effectiveness, and strategic competition. It examines these concepts through a comparative reading of classical and contemporary literature to identify their defining characteristics, clarify their analytical boundaries, and establish their relationships.

This study pays particular attention to military power itself. Existing approaches frequently emphasise material indicators such as force size, technological sophistication, defence expenditure, or operational capability. While these factors matter, they offer only a partial account of military power because they do not fully capture its institutional, organisational, political, societal, and strategic dimensions.

Following the conceptual traditions developed by Sartori (1984), Goertz (2006), and Gerring (1999), the study therefore seeks to establish a broader conceptualisation incorporating both material and non-material dimensions.

This methodological logic is informed by the conceptual framework construction approach described by Jabareen (2009). Jabareen is used here as a methodological reference for selecting, interpreting, relating, and synthesising concepts from different theoretical traditions. The resulting analytical model, however, constitutes the original contribution of the present study.

1.4. Theoretical Synthesis

The second methodological pillar is theoretical synthesis. Strategic thought has developed through diverse intellectual traditions extending from classical thinkers such as Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz to contemporary scholars addressing strategy, power, deterrence, coercion, conflict, and international politics.

Relevant knowledge is consequently distributed across strategic theory, international relations, security studies, military sociology, organisational theory, and contemporary military studies. The study addresses this fragmentation through analytical synthesis, drawing upon the theory-building traditions associated with Merton (1968), Waltz (1979), and Jaccard and Jacoby (2010).

Rather than privileging a single theoretical school, the research combines relevant insights from classical strategic theory, realism and neorealism, deterrence theory, security studies, military sociology, organisational theory, and contemporary strategic studies. The purpose is not to eliminate theoretical differences but to identify explanatory relationships that can contribute to an integrated understanding of military power.

This synthesis provides the theoretical basis for distinguishing the structural, functional, and strategic dimensions of the analytical model.

1.5. Historical-Comparative Analysis

The third methodological component is historical-comparative analysis. Historical inquiry is central to strategic studies because strategic thought and military practice are shaped by the historical contexts in which they develop. As Gray (1999) emphasises, strategic theory cannot be separated from the historical experience through which strategic ideas emerge and evolve.

Historical examples are therefore employed not as isolated case studies intended to provide statistically generalizable evidence, but as sources of analytical insight. They illuminate recurring relationships between political objectives, military capabilities, institutional adaptation, strategic employment, and strategic outcomes.

Examples from classical antiquity, the early modern state system, industrial warfare, the Cold War, and contemporary strategic competition allow the study to distinguish enduring characteristics of military power from its historically contingent expressions. This approach aligns with the comparative methodology associated with George and Bennett (2005), particularly their emphasis on patterns and explanatory mechanisms across contexts.

History is thus employed analytically rather than descriptively, with particular attention to continuity and change in the nature and strategic use of military power.

1.6. Doctrinal and Institutional Analysis

The fourth methodological component is doctrinal and institutional analysis. Because military power exists as both a theoretical construct and an institutional reality, the study examines how contemporary military organisations conceptualise and employ military power in practice.

The study examines selected strategic doctrines, military concepts, policy documents, and institutional publications¹ produced by major contemporary security actors, particularly NATO,

¹ Selected relevant doctrines, military concepts, policy documents, and institutional publications of the United States Armed Forces and NATO are published on the following websites. U.S. documents can be found in the

the United States, and the European Union, as expressions of contemporary strategic thinking and institutional practice rather than as objective representations of strategic reality.

Doctrinal analysis connects theoretical concepts with contemporary practice and provides insight into institutional approaches to deterrence, defence, coercion, alliance management, force development, multidomain operations, and strategic competition. It therefore contributes particularly to understanding the structural and strategic dimensions of military power.

1.7. Development of the Analytical Model

The research's principal methodological and scholarly outcome is an original analytical model of military power. The model emerged through an iterative process combining conceptual refinement, theoretical synthesis, historical interpretation, and doctrinal and institutional examination.

The model conceptualises military power as a multidimensional strategic phenomenon operating across three interconnected dimensions:

- 1. Structural dimension**
- 2. Functional dimension**
- 3. Strategic dimension**

The structural dimension concerns the foundations that enable military power to exist, develop, and be sustained. These include political and legal authority, institutional architecture, force structure, material and technological resources, human capital, organisational competence, societal resilience, and alliance networks.

The functional dimension concerns the principal ways in which military power is strategically employed to influence political behaviour and achieve political objectives. The study identifies defence, deterrence, compellence, posturing, offence, and miscellaneous forms of strategic use as the principal categories examined in this dimension.

The strategic dimension situates military power within the broader environment of political decision-making, strategic competition, crisis management, alliance politics, technological change, societal resilience, and international security.

The central proposition is that none of these dimensions is sufficient in isolation. Structural foundations create strategic potential; functional employment translates this potential into military and political effects; and the strategic environment conditions how these effects are perceived, constrained, amplified, or transformed into strategic outcomes.

Military effectiveness does not constitute a fourth dimension. Rather, it functions as an integrating mechanism that translates military potential into usable capability and strategic effect. The model can therefore be understood as a process of:

structural potential → functional employment → strategic effect

Joint Chiefs of Staff database: <https://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-Doctrine-Pubs/>, and Army Publishing Directorate: <https://armypubs.army.mil/default.aspx>. NATO documents are listed on the NATO Standardization Office website: <https://nso.nato.int/protected/nsdd/main/list-promulg>.

with military effectiveness influencing the extent to which this translation is successful.

1.8. Relationship Between the Analytical Model and the Structure of the Book

The book's structure reflects the model's analytical logic. Its organisation is therefore not merely thematic but supports the progressive development and integration of the three dimensions.

The book first establishes the conceptual and theoretical foundations needed to understand military power as a strategic instrument. It then develops the characteristics, strategic environment, forms of strategic employment, and structural foundations of military power before addressing its effectiveness and its transformation under multidomain, technological, civil–military, and future strategic conditions.

The chapters consequently provide complementary analytical building blocks rather than independent thematic units. Together, they demonstrate the relationships among the structural, functional, and strategic dimensions of military power and the role of military effectiveness in connecting them.

The final synthesis returns to the research questions and integrates the findings into the study's proposed analytical model.

1.9. Scope and Limitations

The study operates within defined analytical boundaries. Its primary focus is military power at the state level and within formal military institutions. The study considers non-state actors, irregular warfare, hybrid threats, and emerging technological domains where relevant, but they do not constitute the principal unit of analysis.

The study focuses on military power as an instrument of strategy rather than on the comprehensive measurement of national power. Economic, diplomatic, informational, societal, and technological factors are therefore examined primarily insofar as they affect the generation, employment, effectiveness, or strategic consequences of military power.

Historical examples are selective and analytical rather than comprehensive. The study does not seek to provide a complete history of warfare, predict specific future conflicts, or provide operational guidance for military planning. Its purpose is explanatory rather than predictive.

The analytical model should consequently be understood as a conceptual and explanatory instrument rather than a quantitative index or predictive algorithm. It provides a structured way to examine how military power is generated, employed, assessed, and translated into strategic outcomes.

1.10. Scientific Contribution

The study's principal scientific contribution is an original analytical model of military power with three interconnected dimensions: structural, functional, and strategic.

The model addresses the fragmentation of approaches that frequently examine military capabilities, deterrence, military effectiveness, technology, operational employment, or strategic competition separately. Its contribution lies not simply in identifying three categories, but in specifying their relationships.

The structural dimension explains the foundations from which military power derives its potential. The functional dimension explains how that potential is employed to pursue strategic

objectives and influence political behaviour. The strategic dimension explains how the broader political, institutional, technological, geopolitical, and societal environment conditions the effects of such employment. Military effectiveness provides the integrating mechanism connecting these dimensions.

The study consequently conceptualises military power as a relational, systemic, and context-dependent phenomenon, rather than as a static accumulation of resources.

The scientific contribution can be summarised in three respects:

First, the study provides a multidimensional conceptualisation of military power extending beyond material capability to include institutional, organisational, technological, political, societal, and strategic factors.

Second, it distinguishes between the foundations of military power, its strategic employment, and the strategic context in which it operates, while explaining the relationships among these dimensions.

Third, it provides an integrated analytical model for examining military power across cooperation, competition, crisis, and armed conflict, and across changing technological and geopolitical environments.

The model therefore provides a common analytical basis for examining how military power is generated, how it functions, why its effectiveness varies across contexts, and how technological and strategic transformation may alter its future role.

2. STRATEGY AND POWER

Understanding military power requires appreciating the strategic framework within which it operates. Strategy provides the intellectual and political context that links political objectives to available resources and determines how those resources may be employed. Military power therefore cannot be assessed in isolation from the policy it is intended to support. As Colin S. Gray (1999) emphasises, strategy is fundamentally concerned with the use made of power in pursuit of political objectives. Without such a relationship between political purpose and the employment of available means, military power risks becoming ineffective, disproportionate, or strategically irrelevant.

The relationship between war and policy is nevertheless neither straightforward nor mechanical. War has no independent rationale separate from political purpose. Rather, it must remain subordinate to policy and serve political objectives. Clausewitz (1976) captured this relationship in his formulation of war as the continuation of politics by other means. This does not mean political objectives can be translated into military tasks, or that military action will necessarily produce the intended political outcome. The interaction between policy and war is complex because political purposes, military means, and opponents' behaviour continually influence one another. Strategy consequently operates in an environment characterised by uncertainty, friction, competition, and adaptation, in which an adversary's actions can frustrate even carefully conceived plans.

2.1. Theory of Strategy and Power

The study of strategy therefore requires more than familiarity with military history, operational experience, or contemporary strategic fashions. Strategy requires serious and sustained intellectual study that remains sufficiently independent of prevailing moral, political, operational, and intellectual preferences. Strategic thought is particularly vulnerable to fashionable concepts, technological optimism, institutional assumptions, and simplified interpretations of contemporary conflict. A rigorous study of strategy must instead seek to identify those characteristics of conflict and competition that remain persistent despite changes in technology, political circumstances, organisational structures, and methods of warfare. The value of strategic theory lies partly in its capacity to distinguish enduring features of strategic interaction from temporary characteristics of a particular historical period.

Strategy's enduring character derives from the fact that it remains fundamentally violent and competitive. Although the instruments, technologies, organisations, and operational concepts through which force is employed may change, the essential strategic relationship between opposing actors remains remarkably constant. Strategy involves actors pursuing objectives while facing resistance from others. The adversary possesses agency, adapts to one's actions, seeks to impose costs, and attempts to prevent the achievement of one's objectives. Consequently, strategy cannot be reduced to the efficient application of resources according to predetermined rules. Its violent and competitive nature must be acknowledged rather than obscured by technological, organisational, or conceptual developments.

This enduring nature of strategy also explains why strategy does not tolerate simple formulas or universal principles for success. Strategic problems are characterised by complexity because ends, ways, and means interact in uncertain, continuously changing circumstances. A course of action that succeeds in one strategic context may fail in another because political objectives, capabilities, geography, the adversary, alliances, or prevailing circumstances differ. Strategy therefore demands judgement rather than mechanical application of supposedly universal rules.

Strategic effectiveness depends upon the ability to understand a particular situation, identify its essential features, anticipate the reactions of other actors, and adapt action accordingly.

This emphasis on complexity is evident throughout the history of strategic thought. Sun Tzu (1963) stressed the importance of shaping the conditions of conflict, deception, adaptability, and understanding the adversary before resorting to direct combat. Thucydides (1954) showed how fear, honour, interest, political calculation, and perceptions of relative power shape state behaviour. Machiavelli (2019) similarly emphasised prudence and adaptability in exercising political and military power. These perspectives differ considerably in their historical and intellectual contexts, yet together they show that strategy cannot be separated from political actors' behaviour and the uncertainty generated by their interaction.

Strategic theory can help practitioners deal with this complexity, but it cannot guarantee success. Theory offers concepts, analytical frameworks, historical insights, and intellectual tools to examine strategic problems more systematically. It can help practitioners identify recurring patterns, understand the relationship between political objectives and military action, assess the consequences of alternative courses of action, and recognise the limitations imposed by uncertainty and opposition. It cannot, however, eliminate uncertainty or substitute for strategic judgement. Theory therefore should not be regarded as a formula for achieving victory but as a means of improving the quality of strategic reasoning.

The relationship between strategy and power consequently extends beyond the conduct of war. Modern strategic studies encompass the coordinated use of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments to influence other actors' behaviour and achieve political objectives. Strategy operates across the spectrum of political interaction, including cooperation, competition, deterrence, crisis management, and armed conflict. As Freedman (2013) observes, strategy concerns creating and applying power to achieve objectives in situations in which others may seek to resist or counter those objectives. Strategy is therefore fundamentally relational: its success depends not only on an actor's resources but also on how those resources interact with others' capabilities, intentions, perceptions, and responses.

Within this broader strategic framework, military force represents one of the principal instruments available to policy. It is a flexible, if blunt, instrument because it can be employed in different ways and for different political purposes. Military power may be used directly through combat operations, but it may also contribute to deterrence, coercion, reassurance, signalling, crisis management, or preserving favourable strategic conditions. The mere possession or deployment of military capability may therefore have political consequences even when force is not actually employed in combat. The strategic significance of military power consequently depends not simply upon its physical effectiveness but upon how credibly and appropriately it can be connected to political objectives.

Strategy can therefore be understood as the organising logic that connects political purpose with power while accounting for uncertainty, competition, and resistance. Its constant nature lies in the enduring interaction between political objectives and the violent and competitive character of conflict; its complexity arises from the adaptive behaviour of opposing actors and the absence of guaranteed outcomes. Strategic theory offers an essential lens for understanding this complexity, but strategy ultimately remains an exercise in judgement. Military power derives its strategic value not from its existence alone, but from its ability to serve policy through appropriate, credible, and context-sensitive employment. This provides the conceptual foundation for examining military power not merely as a collection of capabilities, but as an instrument whose ultimate significance is determined by the political purposes and strategic choices that govern its use.

2.2. The Levels of Strategy

Strategy is conducted at several interconnected levels, each reflecting a different scope of political and military decision-making, responsibility, and activity. These levels should not be understood as isolated or strictly hierarchical compartments. Rather, they provide an analytical framework for examining how political purposes translate into strategic choices and, ultimately, military action. The distinction between the levels matters because decisions at one level inevitably influence, and are constrained by, decisions at the others.

At the highest level, grand strategy concerns the broad direction of national policy and how the instruments of national power are coordinated to pursue political objectives. It establishes the relationship between the ends a state seeks to achieve and the resources and instruments available to attain them. Grand strategy consequently extends beyond the purely military sphere and encompasses diplomatic, economic, informational, and military means. Its central concern is not simply accumulating power, but purposefully organising and applying available resources in accordance with long-term political interests. As Liddell Hart (1967) argues, strategy must ultimately create conditions that facilitate achieving political objectives, while Posen (1984) emphasises the relationship between national objectives, strategic choices, and the development and employment of military power.

Within this broader framework, military strategy addresses how military force contributes to achieving political objectives. It establishes how military power is to be developed, organised, positioned, and employed in support of policy. Military strategy therefore sits between political purpose and the practical employment of military forces. It must translate political direction into feasible military objectives while ensuring that the employment of force remains consistent with the broader strategic purpose. At the same time, military strategy cannot be formulated independently of political considerations: the availability of military capabilities, their limitations, and the risks of their employment can influence political choices and strategic objectives.

Below the strategic level is the operational level, concerned with the design and conduct of campaigns and major operations intended to achieve military-strategic objectives. Operational activity provides the essential link between strategic direction and tactical action. It involves determining how military forces and capabilities should be employed across time and space to generate effects that contribute cumulatively to strategic objectives. Operational planning must therefore consider the sequencing and coordination of activities, resource allocation, and interactions among different military actions. The operational level is consequently not merely an intermediate administrative layer but a means of translating strategic intent into a coherent pattern of military activity.

At the lower level, tactics concerns the employment of military forces and capabilities in engagements and other specific military actions. Tactical activity generally focuses on achieving immediate or localised objectives through the application of combat power. Tactical success, however, does not necessarily equate to strategic success. The significance of tactical actions depends upon their contribution to operational outcomes and, ultimately, to the political objectives that provide the purpose for military action. A tactically successful engagement may therefore have limited strategic value if it does not contribute to the broader operational design or strategic purpose.

The levels of strategy should consequently be regarded as interdependent rather than autonomous. Political objectives provide the fundamental purpose, grand strategy determines the broader allocation and coordination of national power, military strategy establishes the

contribution of military force, the operational level converts strategic direction into campaigns and operations, and tactics applies military capabilities in specific engagements. The effectiveness of the overall strategic endeavour depends upon coherence across these levels. At the same time, the relationship is not exclusively one-way: developments and constraints at the operational and tactical levels can affect military strategy and, ultimately, political decision-making. Understanding these interactions is therefore essential to appreciating strategy as a continuous process of aligning political ends, available means, and appropriate ways of action.

2.3. Characteristics, Purpose and Objectives of Strategy

Strategy can be understood as the process through which political purposes are translated into purposeful action in an environment characterised by uncertainty, competition and interaction. It establishes a relationship between ends, ways and means, while recognising that strategic outcomes are rarely determined by the actions of one actor alone. As Freedman (2013) argues, strategy is fundamentally concerned with pursuing advantage in situations where interests compete, and the behaviour of other actors cannot be controlled. Strategy therefore provides direction and coherence, but its effectiveness depends upon the ability to reconcile political objectives with available resources and to adapt to the reactions of an intelligent opponent.

A principal characteristic of strategy is its purposefulness. Strategy is not simply a plan for employing resources, but a deliberate effort to achieve defined political objectives. It establishes priorities and provides coherence between objectives, available capabilities and the actions undertaken to achieve them. This relationship is nevertheless neither linear nor mechanical. Political objectives may change, resources may prove inadequate, and the ways selected to achieve an objective may generate consequences that alter the original strategic situation. Strategy must therefore remain coherent enough to provide direction while retaining the flexibility needed to accommodate changing circumstances.

Strategy is also distinguished by the disharmony that may arise among its different levels. Political, strategic and operational considerations do not necessarily remain aligned. Political authorities may set objectives that exceed the capabilities of military or other instruments of power, while operational requirements may create pressures that conflict with broader political priorities. Strategic effectiveness therefore requires continuous interaction between levels rather than the simple transmission of political direction down a hierarchical chain. Strategy aims not merely to develop an optimal plan, but to maintain a viable relationship among political aims, available resources, and the actions through which those aims are pursued.

A further defining characteristic is the multidimensional nature of strategic activity. Contemporary strategy cannot be confined to military action or to the application of military power. Political, diplomatic, economic, informational, technological and military factors interact and may reinforce or constrain one another. Strategic outcomes can consequently emerge from the cumulative effects of activities undertaken across several instruments of power. The strategist must therefore consider not only individual capabilities but also their interrelationships and the wider political context in which they are employed. This multidimensionality makes coordination essential, since actions undertaken in one area may facilitate, constrain or contradict those pursued elsewhere.

Strategy is equally characterised by uncertainty and interaction with an intelligent foe. Unlike routine planning, strategic action takes place in an environment in which other actors possess their own objectives, capabilities and freedom of action. An adversary is therefore not a passive obstacle but an active participant capable of anticipating, adapting to and countering one's actions. Strategic success cannot consequently be guaranteed through superior planning alone.

It requires continuous assessment of the opponent's intentions and likely responses, together with the ability to adapt one's own behaviour. This interactive character also explains the importance of perception, signalling, deception, and managing expectations within strategic competition.

Friction, uncertainty, and contingency reinforce strategy's dynamic character. Clausewitz (1976) emphasised that the practical conduct of war is affected by numerous unpredictable factors that separate actual outcomes from those anticipated in planning. Strategy must therefore accommodate the possibility that assumptions will prove incorrect and that intended effects will not materialise as expected. Adaptation is consequently not an exception to strategic practice but an inherent requirement.

Ultimately, strategy aims to create and sustain a favourable relationship between political objectives, available means, and the actions required to achieve them. Strategic success does not necessarily mean achieving every original objective in its entirety. Rather, it involves shaping conditions, exploiting opportunities, managing constraints, and influencing the behaviour of competitors or adversaries to improve one's relative position. Strategy is therefore simultaneously purposive, political, multidimensional and interactive. Its central challenge lies in maintaining coherence among ends, ways, and means while continuously adapting to an environment in which both circumstances and intelligent opponents can change the conditions on which strategic choices depend.

2.4. Relationship Between Strategy, Military Power, and Military Force

Military power occupies a distinctive position within the broader framework of strategy because it represents the organised capacity to apply or threaten violence to pursue political objectives. Understanding military power therefore requires appreciating the strategic context in which it is generated, maintained, and employed. As strategic theory consistently emphasises, military force is not an autonomous phenomenon but an instrument that derives its meaning and value from the political purposes it serves. Clausewitz's celebrated formulation that war constitutes the continuation of politics by other means remains the central starting point for understanding this relationship (Clausewitz 1976). War, military institutions, and military capabilities cannot be understood independently of the political communities that create them, nor can military power be assessed solely through quantitative measures such as force size, technological sophistication, or defence expenditure. Rather, military power must be viewed as one element within a broader process through which states seek to influence events, secure interests, and shape the behaviour of others.

The relationship between strategy and power lies at the heart of strategic studies. Power represents the capacity to influence outcomes, while strategy provides the logic through which that capacity is applied to pursue political objectives. Power alone does not guarantee success. States may possess substantial military, economic, or political capabilities yet fail to achieve their objectives if they use those capabilities without a coherent strategic direction. Conversely, actors with comparatively limited resources may obtain disproportionate influence when they successfully align available means with effective strategic approaches.

As Clausewitz (1976) emphasised, the use of force must remain subordinate to political purpose. Strategy therefore bridges political intent and practical action by determining how power is organised, where it is concentrated, and under what conditions it is employed. Modern strategic thought has further expanded this understanding by highlighting interactions among different forms of power. Schelling (1966) showed that coercive influence often operates through threats, expectations, and the manipulation of risk rather than direct violence,

underscoring the importance of credibility, signalling, and deterrence. Nye (2004) similarly highlighted the role of attraction, legitimacy, and persuasion in shaping others' behaviour through what he termed soft power. Together, these perspectives show that strategy is fundamentally concerned with managing and applying power in competitive environments, shaping how states pursue influence, respond to threats, and balance cooperation with rivalry.

Drawing on a synthesis of ideas commonly found in the strategic studies, international relations, and security studies literature, particularly in the works of Clausewitz (1976), Morgenthau (2006), Art (2004), and Troxell (2006), military power is understood as a state's ability to use force or the threat of force to achieve national strategic goals and thereby influence its security and position within the international system. Military power is essential for maintaining national sovereignty, protecting national interests, and deterring external threats. It also contributes to a state's capacity to project influence, shape other actors' behaviour, and support political objectives. In an international environment characterised by competition and uncertainty, military strength can affect the balance of power, influence regional and global stability, and strengthen a state's position in negotiations, alliances, and other strategic interactions.

In this context, military force refers to the organised military capabilities that states and, in some cases, non-state actors use to achieve objectives through coercive means. It constitutes the practical instrument through which military power is generated and exercised. Military force plays a vital role in national defence and international security by enabling states to protect their sovereignty, deter aggression, and project influence beyond their borders. Consequently, military force translates military power into strategic and political effects, while military power represents the broader capacity to influence outcomes through the actual or threatened use of force.

The relationship between strategy and military power begins with the nature of war itself. War is a social and political phenomenon arising from conflicts of interest among organised groups, not simply a technical contest of military capabilities. War reflects competing political objectives pursued through force under conditions of uncertainty, danger, and resistance. Consequently, military power exists not merely to conduct combat operations but to support political objectives within a competitive strategic environment. This perspective prevents military force from being reduced to a purely operational or technological activity and instead situates it within the broader interaction between policy, strategy, and conflict. Military power gains strategic significance only when linked to clearly defined political purposes and integrated into a coherent strategy that translates military action into political effect.

Decisions about the employment of military force are among the most consequential choices states make because their effects are often irreversible and extend well beyond the immediate battlefield. Military power is both the most important and the most dangerous instrument available to states. The potential costs of military action, including escalation, unintended consequences, and long-term political repercussions, require a degree of strategic judgement that cannot be replaced by technological superiority or military efficiency alone. Consequently, superficial understandings of military power that focus exclusively on weapons, platforms, or tactical effectiveness risk overlooking the political and strategic realities that ultimately determine military success or failure.

From a realist perspective, the continued importance of military power derives from the structure of the international system itself. In a world characterised by the absence of a central authority capable of guaranteeing security, states must retain the capacity to defend themselves and protect their interests. As Mearsheimer (2001) argues, uncertainty about others' intentions

creates strong incentives for states to maintain credible military capabilities. Military power consequently serves both as a means of protection and as an instrument for influencing the behaviour of potential adversaries. Its enduring significance reflects the realities of international politics, where states continue to operate in an environment characterised by competition, insecurity, and the persistent possibility of coercion.

Even where diplomacy, economic interdependence, and international institutions moderate competition, military capabilities continue to shape bargaining power, credibility, and strategic influence.

However, military power should not be understood solely as an instrument used during war. One of the most significant developments in modern strategic thought has been the recognition that military force fulfils a wide range of political functions across the spectrum of peace, competition, crisis, and armed conflict. States employ military power to achieve diverse political purposes including deterrence, compellence, defence, reassurance, and dissuasion. Military force therefore serves not only to defeat opponents in combat but also to shape decisions, perceptions, and behaviour before violence occurs.

Deterrence represents one of the most significant strategic functions of military power. Its purpose is to persuade a potential adversary not to undertake a particular action by convincing that actor that the anticipated costs outweigh any expected benefits. Deterrence effectiveness depends not only on military capability but also on credibility, communication, and perception. As Schelling (1960; 1966) demonstrated, military power often exerts its greatest influence through the threat of force rather than its actual use. Military capabilities create strategic effects by shaping an opponent's calculations and influencing expectations regarding the likely consequences of future actions. Similarly, deterrence depends on the ability to impose unacceptable costs or convince an adversary that it cannot achieve its objectives. In this sense, military power functions as a bargaining instrument, influencing behaviour through the prospect of future consequences rather than immediate destruction.

Closely related to deterrence is compellence, which seeks not to prevent an action but to alter behaviour that is already underway. Whereas deterrence preserves the status quo, compellence attempts to change it. Compellence generally requires a combination of threats, limited force, and political pressure designed to persuade an opponent to adopt a different course of action. Troxell (2006), drawing on Schelling's work, argues that compellence is generally more difficult than deterrence because it requires an adversary to reverse an existing commitment, often at the cost of prestige, legitimacy, or political standing. Success therefore depends not only upon the coercive capacity of military force but also upon the strategic context in which that force is employed.

Military power also performs essential defensive functions. The traditional role of military forces remains protecting territory, populations, sovereignty, and national interests against external threats. Defence represents the most fundamental application of military power because it seeks either to prevent attacks or minimise their consequences. Defence is therefore not merely a military activity but a political function that safeguards the state's existence and independence. Modern military forces continue to provide this protective role, even as threats evolve to include cyber-attacks, terrorism, hybrid warfare, and challenges to critical infrastructure.

Beyond deterrence, compellence, and defence, military power contributes to broader strategic purposes such as reassurance and dissuasion. Reassurance seeks to strengthen allies' and partners' confidence by demonstrating commitment, reliability, and capability. Forward military presence, alliance commitments, joint exercises, and security cooperation contribute to

reassurance by reducing uncertainty and strengthening collective security arrangements. Reassurance is therefore central to alliance management, particularly in contemporary security partnerships. By contrast, dissuasion seeks to discourage potential competitors from developing capabilities or pursuing strategies that could challenge existing balances of power. By maintaining substantial military advantages and demonstrating the ability to preserve them, states may influence rivals' long-term strategic calculations.

The strategic significance of military power nevertheless extends beyond these individual functions. Modern military forces now operate within increasingly complex security environments characterised by multidomain competition, technological innovation, and persistent rivalry below the threshold of conventional war. Contemporary conflicts often combine conventional military operations, information campaigns, cyber activities, economic coercion, proxy warfare, and political subversion. These developments have altered the character of warfare without fundamentally changing its nature. War's enduring nature lies in its political character, its reliance on force, and the interaction between opposing wills. Military power therefore remains relevant not because conflict is unchanged, but because the fundamental relationship between political objectives, coercion, and organised violence endures despite changing methods and technologies.

This distinction between war's changing character and its enduring nature has important implications for studying military power. Technological innovation undoubtedly affects how military force is organised and employed. Precision strike capabilities, cyber systems, unmanned platforms, artificial intelligence, and space-based assets have transformed many aspects of military operations. Yet technological advances do not remove the uncertainty, friction, and human agency that continue to shape strategic outcomes. Military superiority in equipment or technology does not automatically translate into political success. Experiences in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and numerous other conflicts illustrate that military effectiveness must be understood in relation to political objectives, societal conditions, institutional capacities, and adversary adaptation. Strategic success therefore remains fundamentally dependent upon judgement rather than merely technological advantage.

Consequently, military power cannot be separated from the institutional and societal contexts that sustain it. Military forces draw their effectiveness not only from weapons and organisations but also from political legitimacy, professional competence, economic resources, industrial capacity, and public support. Military institutions exist within broader national security ecosystems that shape their ability to perform strategic functions. The effectiveness of military power depends on integrating military capabilities with diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of statecraft. Troxell (2006) explicitly cautions against viewing military force as sufficient, arguing instead that successful strategy requires the coordinated application of multiple instruments of power.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the relationship between strategy, military power, and military force is a central foundation of strategic thought. Strategy provides the intellectual and practical framework through which power is connected to political purpose, while power provides the means through which strategic objectives may be pursued. Within this relationship, military force occupies a distinctive position because it represents the organised capacity to employ, or credibly threaten to employ, violence in support of political objectives. Yet military force cannot be understood as an autonomous phenomenon. Its significance derives not from its destructive potential or its material components alone, but from how it is integrated into strategy and used to pursue policy. In this respect, the enduring validity of Clausewitz's (1976) insight

remains evident: military action acquires meaning only through its relationship to political purpose.

The chapter has further shown that military force should not be viewed merely as a collection of personnel, weapon systems, platforms, or technologies. Rather, it constitutes the practical instrument through which military power is translated into strategic effect. Military power represents a broader capacity to influence outcomes through the actual or threatened use of force, whereas military force provides the organised means through which that capacity is exercised. As with strategy itself, effectiveness depends not simply on possessing capabilities but on their appropriate connection to clearly defined political objectives and realistic strategic ambitions. The recurring challenge for policymakers and military leaders is therefore not the accumulation of military resources alone, but aligning those resources with achievable political ends.

A further conclusion concerns the position of military force within the wider system of national power. Contemporary strategy requires the coordinated application of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments, each contributing differently to the pursuit of strategic objectives. Military force remains unique among these instruments because of its coercive character, yet it rarely achieves enduring political outcomes on its own. Diplomatic engagement lends legitimacy and strengthens alliances, informational instruments shape perceptions and strategic narratives, and economic capacity sustains military readiness, technological development, and national resilience. The effectiveness of military force therefore depends largely on its integration with these complementary instruments of statecraft. Strategic success emerges not from the isolated application of military means but from their coherent incorporation within a broader strategic approach.

The discussion has also reinforced the conclusion that military force possesses neither universal utility nor inherent decisiveness. As strategic studies scholarship has consistently demonstrated, military capabilities are not equally effective across all missions and strategic circumstances (Posen 1984; Biddle 2004). Military forces are expected to perform a diverse range of functions, including deterrence, territorial defence, reassurance, power projection, stabilisation, counterinsurgency, peace support operations, and support to civil authorities. Capabilities optimised for one purpose may prove inadequate for another. Strategic effectiveness therefore depends less upon the possession of military power than upon the suitability of military capabilities for the political objectives they are intended to support. Failures frequently arise when political ambitions exceed available military means or when military action is expected to produce political outcomes beyond its practical capacity.

More broadly, the chapter has demonstrated that the value of military force is inherently context-dependent. Because strategy unfolds within an environment characterised by uncertainty, adaptation, and interaction among competing actors, military force cannot be employed according to fixed formulas or universally applicable principles. Its effectiveness varies according to geography, political objectives, alliance structures, escalation dynamics, technological conditions, and adversary perceptions. Measures that successfully deter one opponent may prove ineffective against another with different interests, capabilities, or risk tolerances. Strategic judgement therefore remains indispensable. The utility of military force derives not from abstract measures of strength alone but from the ability to adapt military capabilities to specific strategic circumstances.

Another important conclusion concerns the nature of coercion itself. As Schelling's (1960, 1966) work demonstrates, military force frequently achieves its greatest strategic effects without actual combat. Its influence often derives from credible threats, deterrent postures, risk

manipulation, and strategic signalling rather than direct violence. Military capabilities shape behaviour by influencing other actors' calculations and altering perceptions of the likely consequences of particular actions. The strategic importance of military force therefore depends as much on credibility, legitimacy, communication, and political resolve as on material superiority. Military force functions not only as an instrument of destruction but also as an instrument of influence.

The chapter further highlights the integrated foundations on which military effectiveness ultimately rests. Military force is sustained by a complex interaction of political institutions, legal authority, economic resources, industrial capacity, technological innovation, professional expertise, organisational effectiveness, societal support, and doctrinal coherence. These elements operate as a mutually reinforcing system. Legal legitimacy without military capability provides little protection, while military capability without political legitimacy risks strategic failure. Similarly, advanced technology cannot compensate indefinitely for institutional weakness, deficient doctrine, inadequate training, or limited public support. Military force therefore cannot be reduced analytically to its visible components alone; its effectiveness reflects the broader political, institutional, and societal foundations from which it derives strength.

The importance of alliances and partnerships reinforces this conclusion. Although alliances expand strategic reach, strengthen deterrence, and facilitate burden-sharing, their effectiveness ultimately depends upon the credibility of the military capabilities that support them. As Mearsheimer (2001) argues, alliances modify rather than eliminate the realities of power politics. Cooperation, institutional commitments, and shared norms remain important, but they cannot substitute for credible military capabilities when vital interests are at stake. Military strength consequently continues to play a significant role in shaping alliance cohesion, strategic influence, and perceptions of resolve within the international system.

Viewed holistically, military force performs a broad range of strategic functions extending well beyond the conduct of warfare. It contributes to deterrence, defence, crisis management, reassurance, coercion, and maintaining favourable strategic conditions. Military forces protect sovereignty and territorial integrity, support alliance commitments, reinforce resilience, secure critical infrastructure, and provide governments with options for responding to crises and challenges. Their strategic impact therefore derives not merely from their ability to impose costs but from their capacity to shape perceptions, influence decisions, and affect the behaviour of other actors. In this sense, military force remains simultaneously physical and psychological, material and political, with its effectiveness depending upon credibility, competence, readiness, legitimacy, and resolve (Art and Greenhill 2018a; Johnston 1995).

This analysis yields several broader implications. First, military force is fundamentally multidimensional, deriving effectiveness from the interaction of material, institutional, political, and societal factors. Second, its utility remains context-dependent and contingent upon circumstances rather than universally applicable. Third, it generates both immediate and long-term strategic effects through deterrence, signalling, readiness, presence, and institutional continuity. Finally, it remains inseparable from the broader system of national power within which it operates. Its greatest strategic value is realised when employed in concert with diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments as part of a coherent strategic design.

Ultimately, these conclusions reaffirm the chapter's central argument: military force is a vital but subordinate component of the broader relationship between strategy and power. It remains the most coercive instrument available to states, yet its effectiveness depends upon the extent to which it serves political objectives and contributes to a coherent strategic purpose.

Technological change, emerging domains of competition, and evolving patterns of conflict continue to influence the character of military activity, but they have not altered the fundamental relationship between political purpose, strategy, power, and organised violence. Military force remains an indispensable instrument of power not because it guarantees strategic success, but because it gives states a unique capacity to influence outcomes in a competitive and uncertain world. Its enduring significance lies in its ability to translate political intent into strategic effect, while remaining firmly embedded within the broader framework of policy, strategy, and national power.

3. KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF MILITARY INSTRUMENT OF POWER

Military power cannot be understood solely through weapons, force structures, or military capabilities. Its effectiveness derives from the interaction of political leadership, military institutions, and society, reflecting the principle that war is not merely an act of violence but a political instrument that must remain aligned with policy objectives and strategic considerations. This relationship corresponds to what Clausewitz described as the trinity of reason, chance, and passion. In practical terms, this trinity links political authority, which determines the objectives for which military power is employed; military force, which serves as the organised instrument through which military power is generated and exercised; and the population, whose support, resilience, and willingness to bear the costs of competition and conflict provide an essential foundation for military effectiveness. Military power therefore exists not as an autonomous instrument but as a broader national capacity that emerges from the dynamic interaction of political purpose, military force, and societal commitment (Waldman 2016).

Military force derives its significance from the political objectives it serves and from its ability to translate military power into strategic and political effects. At the same time, uncertainty, friction, and adversaries' adaptive behaviour shape the use of military force, making military power far more complex than a simple measure of force, technology, or resources. Political aims, military force, and societal factors continually interact, influencing both the opportunities and limitations of military action.

This understanding provides an important foundation for analysing the characteristics of military power. States' ability to employ military power effectively depends not only on the quality of their military forces but also on the relationship between political leadership, military institutions, and society. Understanding these characteristics is essential for examining how military power contributes to deterrence, reassurance, crisis management, defence, and combat operations across the spectrum of strategic competition (Gray 1999; Freedman 2013). Military power achieves its greatest strategic value when the elements of Clausewitz's trinity remain aligned, allowing military force to support political objectives while maintaining the legitimacy, credibility, and resilience that underpin long-term strategic effectiveness.

3.1. Potential for Organised Violence

Military power occupies a distinctive position among the instruments of national power because it represents the organised capacity to employ, or credibly threaten to employ, force to pursue political objectives. Unlike diplomatic instruments, which rely primarily on persuasion and negotiation, or economic instruments, which operate through incentives and sanctions, military power derives its unique strategic significance from its coercive character and its ability to impose physical costs on an adversary. As Clausewitz (1976) argued, the employment of force remains inseparable from political purpose, making military power the most direct and tangible instrument through which states can compel, deter, defend, or influence the behaviour of others.

The strategic value of military power, however, extends beyond the actual use of military force. Much of its influence derives from the credibility of the threat that it represents and from the expectations it creates among both adversaries and allies. As Schelling (1966) emphasises, military power functions as both a means of coercion and a guarantee of commitment. It discourages actions that threaten national interests while reassuring allies, partners, and domestic audiences that political commitments can be upheld if necessary. Military power occupies a unique position within strategy, linking political intent to enforceable outcomes

through the actual or threatened application of force. In this respect, its effectiveness depends not only on military capabilities but also on perceptions of credibility, resolve, and the willingness to employ those capabilities when required.

Military power generates strategic effects even when military force is not employed in combat. Activities such as training exercises, forward deployments, patrols, readiness measures, and adjustments to force posture communicate capability, intent, and resolve to multiple audiences. These actions contribute to deterrence, reassurance, signalling, and the shaping of adversary calculations without necessarily crossing the threshold of armed conflict. Historical and contemporary examples illustrate this enduring characteristic. Military power serves not only as an instrument of warfare but also as a continuous means of influencing strategic interaction across the spectrum of competition, crisis, and conflict.

3.2. Coercive and Protective Roles

Unlike other instruments of national power, military power derives its strategic value from its capacity both to influence adversaries' behaviour through the actual or threatened use of force and to protect the state, its population, and its critical interests from external threats. These coercive and protective dimensions are analytically distinct but closely interconnected, together enabling military power to contribute to deterrence, defence, reassurance, and the maintenance of favourable strategic conditions.

The coercive dimension of military power allows states to shape other actors' decisions and actions by affecting their assessment of risks, costs, and potential benefits. Military deployments, exercises, demonstrations of force, or precision strikes may alter an adversary's calculations and influence strategic decision-making without necessarily requiring large-scale combat operations (Art and Greenhill 2018a). The effectiveness of coercion depends not only upon military capability but also upon credibility, communication, timing, and consistency with political objectives. Historical examples such as Prussian military manoeuvre, NATO's forward deployment and nuclear posture during the Cold War, and post-Cold War United States expeditionary operations demonstrate how credible military capabilities can deter, compel, and influence behaviour through the threat of force alone (Krepinevich 2010b).

At the same time, military power possesses an equally important protective dimension. Military forces contribute to the defence of territory, sovereignty, populations, and critical national interests while also enhancing national resilience against a wide range of threats. In the contemporary security environment, protection extends beyond traditional territorial defence to include cyber defence, the security of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, the protection of space-based assets, critical infrastructure, supply chains, and support to civil authorities during major emergencies (Nye 2011). Historically, this protective role has been fundamental to strategic effectiveness. Roman legions secured frontiers and lines of communication, industrial-era societies mobilised resources to sustain military campaigns, and nuclear forces' survivability during the Cold War strengthened deterrence by ensuring a credible retaliatory capability (Freedman 2003; Gaddis 2005a).

The coercive and protective dimensions of military power reinforce each other. Effective protective capabilities strengthen deterrence by enhancing resilience, credibility, and reassurance, while credible coercive capabilities contribute to security by discouraging aggression and shaping adversary expectations. Their effectiveness depends upon integration with political authority, economic resources, technological capacity, and societal resilience. Although contemporary challenges such as cyber operations, hybrid threats, and asymmetric competition have increased the complexity of the security environment, they reinforce the

enduring importance of adaptation, multidomain coordination, and strategic coherence (Hoffman 2007; Biddle 2004). Then, the coercive and protective character of military power remains one of its most important attributes, enabling states to translate military capability into strategic and political effect.

3.3. Credibility

Credibility is not derived solely from the size of military forces, the quantity of weapon systems, or technological sophistication. Rather, it reflects the extent to which allies, adversaries, and domestic audiences believe military force can achieve its intended purposes and that political leaders are willing to employ it when necessary. Military credibility underpins deterrence, compellence, reassurance, and broader strategic influence. As Schelling (1966) and Jervis (1976) emphasise, states respond not simply to military capabilities themselves but to their perceptions of how those capabilities are likely to be employed under conditions of uncertainty and risk.

Credibility is inherently relational and cumulative. It develops over time through repeated demonstrations of capability, competence, resolve, and consistency between political objectives and military action. Inconsistency, poor performance, or failure to uphold commitments can also weaken it. Because credibility operates through perception, it is vulnerable to miscalculation, signalling failures, and differing interpretations of intent. Military superiority alone does not guarantee strategic influence if opponents question a state's resolve or ability to employ force effectively. Conversely, actors with more limited resources may achieve significant strategic effects if they are perceived as capable, determined, and willing to bear costs.

Several interconnected factors contribute to military credibility. The first is readiness and responsiveness. Military forces must be able to mobilise, deploy, and conduct operations within timeframes relevant to the strategic situation. Readiness turns military capability from a latent resource into a practical instrument of influence by showing that political commitments can translate into action. Throughout history, visible readiness has played an important deterrent role. Roman frontier garrisons, Prussian mobilisation systems, NATO exercises during the Cold War, and contemporary high-readiness formations all signal preparedness, resolve, and the ability to respond rapidly to emerging threats (Art and Greenhill 2018a).

A second factor is professional competence and doctrine. Military credibility depends upon the perceived ability of military forces to convert political objectives into effective military action. Doctrine provides a framework for planning and conducting operations, while professional competence ensures forces can operate effectively under uncertainty and friction. Historical examples, including the Prussian General Staff system and contemporary NATO interoperability standards, demonstrate how professional military institutions enhance confidence in a state's ability to employ force effectively and responsibly (Posen 1984).

Technological sophistication also contributes to credibility by improving operational effectiveness, situational awareness, precision, and freedom of action. Advanced capabilities, including precision-guided weapons, command and control systems, cyber capabilities, unmanned systems, and space-based assets, can enhance both military performance and perceptions of military strength. However, technology generates credibility only when integrated into doctrine, training, and operational practice. Historical experience consistently shows that military effectiveness depends less on technology alone than on successfully integrating it with organisation, leadership, and military doctrine.

Credibility further depends upon a state's capacity to sustain military operations over time. Robust logistics, industrial capacity, resilient supply chains, and secure communications signal that military power can be maintained during prolonged crises or conflicts. Historical examples such as Allied industrial mobilisation during the Second World War illustrate how sustainment contributes directly to strategic influence and military effectiveness (Biddle 2004). Closely related is political resolve. Military capabilities are credible only if political leaders are perceived as willing to bear costs, accept risks, and employ force when required. The sustained commitment demonstrated during the Berlin Airlift and NATO's collective resolve during the Cold War illustrate the importance of aligning political intent with military capability (Art and Greenhill 2018a).

Finally, alliance structures and strategic culture reinforce credibility. Alliances extend deterrence, strengthen reassurance, and increase the costs facing potential aggressors. NATO's collective defence arrangements remain a prominent example of how interoperability, burden-sharing, and shared commitments enhance military credibility. Similarly, strategic culture, shaped by historical experience, institutional traditions, and established patterns of behaviour, influences perceptions of reliability, restraint, and resolve (Johnston 1995).

Military credibility is a multidimensional characteristic of military power that links material capabilities to strategic outcomes. It emerges from the interaction of readiness, professional competence, technological integration, sustainment, political resolve, alliance cohesion, and strategic culture. In an environment characterised by strategic competition, cyber threats, and multidomain operations, credibility often determines whether military power can achieve deterrent, coercive, or reassuring effects without employing force. As such, credibility is a principal way military power generates strategic influence and supports political objectives.

3.4. Military Responsiveness and Rapid-Effect Capabilities

A defining characteristic of military power is its ability to generate immediate and observable effects in support of political objectives. Unlike diplomatic, informational, or economic instruments, which often require extended periods to influence behaviour, military forces can respond within hours or days, enabling states to shape events during the early stages of crises and conflict (Schelling 1966; Freedman 2013). This capacity gives political leaders timely, credible options under uncertainty, allowing them to deter aggression, reassure allies, stabilise deteriorating situations, or influence adversary decision-making before strategic conditions become fixed.

Military responsiveness rests upon the interaction of several mutually reinforcing factors, including high-readiness forces, precision-strike capabilities, forward-positioned assets, and agile command-and-control (C2) arrangements. Together, these capabilities compress decision and response timelines, enhance operational tempo, and enable states to shape the strategic environment rather than merely react to it (Posen 1984; Art and Greenhill 2018a). By reducing the time adversaries must consolidate gains or exploit emerging opportunities, military responsiveness strengthens deterrence and expands political freedom of action.

High-readiness, rapidly deployable forces form the foundation of this capability. Airborne units, marine expeditionary forces, rapid reaction formations, and special operations forces are maintained at elevated readiness to deploy quickly when required. Throughout history, forces that arrive first have often exercised disproportionate influence over strategic outcomes. The deployment of United States airborne forces during the Berlin Crisis of 1961 signalled political resolve and constrained Soviet options, while the manoeuvre and operational tempo demonstrated during the 1991 Gulf War illustrated how speed and surprise can alter the strategic

balance (Freedman 2003; Gaddis 2005b). More recently, Ukraine's rapid mobilisation and force dispersal during the initial phase of Russia's 2022 invasion demonstrated how responsiveness can disrupt adversary plans, deny rapid strategic success, and create time for wider military and political adaptation (Kofman and Lee 2022).

Technological developments have further increased military forces' capacity to generate rapid effects. Precision-guided munitions, long-range strike systems, unmanned aerial systems, and integrated targeting networks allow states to apply force selectively and with limited delay. The strategic significance of these capabilities lies not only in their accuracy but also in their ability to produce calibrated military and political effects while maintaining a degree of escalation control (Schelling 1966; Pape 1996). Operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq demonstrated how precision-strike capabilities could generate strategic outcomes with relatively limited force commitments and reduced collateral damage (Biddle 2004). Such capabilities strengthen both deterrence and coercive signalling by providing political leaders with flexible response options across the spectrum of competition and conflict.

Responsiveness is further enhanced through the forward positioning of forces, equipment, and supporting infrastructure. Forward bases, pre-positioned stocks, rotational deployments, and expeditionary platforms reduce deployment timelines and increase operational reach. NATO's enhanced Forward Presence, United States overseas basing arrangements, and pre-positioned equipment programmes illustrate how proximity improves both responsiveness and credibility (Art and Greenhill 2018a; Gaddis 2005b). Beyond their operational utility, these assets perform an important signalling function by visibly demonstrating commitment, reducing uncertainty for allies, and complicating adversary calculations (Jervis 1976).

The effectiveness of rapid-response capabilities ultimately depends upon agile and coherent command-and-control arrangements. Modern C2 systems integrate intelligence, communications, and decision-making processes across multiple operational domains, enabling forces to operate effectively under severe time constraints. Responsiveness without effective command risks generating confusion and escalation rather than strategic advantage. Historical examples such as the German concept of *Auftragstaktik* and the integrated joint operations of the Gulf War show that the strategic value of speed derives not simply from acting quickly, but from synchronising military action with political intent (Posen 1984; Biddle 2004).

Military responsiveness generates important strategic effects. It contributes to crisis stabilisation, strengthens deterrence, supports humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief operations, reassures allies, and influences adversary behaviour through visible demonstrations of capability and resolve (Schelling 1966; Jervis 1976; Barnett 2011). At the same time, compressed decision timelines may increase the risk of misperception, escalation, and premature action, making clear political guidance and disciplined signalling essential (Freedman 2013). The strategic value of responsiveness depends not only upon speed, but upon its integration with effective command arrangements, technological capability, organisational adaptability, and political objectives. In an increasingly dynamic and contested security environment, rapid-effect capabilities remain an indispensable characteristic of military power and a critical enabler of strategic flexibility (Art and Greenhill 2018a).

3.5. Psychological and Symbolic Impact

The psychological and symbolic dimensions of military power transform military capability into political and strategic influence through presence, signalling, and the management of perceptions. As deterrence theory emphasises, military power often achieves its effects by influencing how others assess risks, costs, intentions, and likely responses rather than through

the direct use of force itself (Schelling 1966; Jervis 1976). Accordingly, military posture, readiness, and visible activity serve as important instruments for shaping the strategic environment across the spectrum of competition, crisis, and conflict.

A visible and sustained military presence communicates resolve, commitment, and readiness. For allies, forward deployments, routine patrols, and persistent force presence reassure them by showing that security commitments are backed by tangible military capabilities rather than political declarations alone. NATO's enhanced forward presence in Eastern Europe after 2014 illustrates how relatively limited military deployments can reinforce deterrence and strengthen alliance cohesion by credibly demonstrating shared risk and collective commitment (Gaddis 2005a). For potential adversaries, military posture and readiness signal response capability, escalation thresholds, and the potential costs of aggression, thereby influencing strategic calculations before military action becomes necessary.

Psychological influence can only be sustained when political declarations, military posture, and operational capabilities remain aligned. As Freedman (2004) argues, deterrence relies not solely on military capability, but on the belief that political leaders have both the resolve and the ability to employ force when required. Visible inconsistencies between stated objectives and available military means can weaken deterrence, encourage strategic opportunism, and increase the risk of misinterpretation. Credibility therefore develops cumulatively through repeated demonstrations of competence, preparedness, and consistency between words and actions.

Military exercises and alliance activities further reinforce these psychological effects. Large-scale exercises, joint training events, and multinational deployments demonstrate operational readiness, interoperability, and collective commitment; they also influence domestic audiences through psychological and symbolic effects. Visible military preparedness can strengthen public confidence, support political legitimacy, and reinforce societal resilience, while perceptions of weakness, inconsistency, or overextension may undermine confidence in national security policy. Thus, military power operates simultaneously across external and internal audiences, requiring careful calibration to reassure allies, deter adversaries, and maintain domestic support without creating unnecessary escalation pressures.

The psychological and symbolic dimensions of military power should be understood as a fundamental characteristic of strategic effectiveness. Through presence, signalling, and credible demonstrations of capability and resolve, military forces shape expectations, influence decision-making, and support deterrence, reassurance, crisis management, and escalation control. By converting visible military capability into perceived political commitment and operational credibility, these effects extend the influence of military power beyond the battlefield and contribute directly to achieving strategic objectives.

3.6. Integration with Other Instruments of Power

Contemporary strategy increasingly emphasises whole-of-government approaches that coordinate diplomatic, informational, economic, and military activities to achieve shared political objectives. Although military power remains unique because of its coercive character, its effectiveness is often enhanced by its interaction with non-military instruments, creating strategic effects that no single instrument could generate independently (Nye 2011). Military power serves not only as an instrument of force but also as an enabler that supports broader national influence across political, economic, and informational dimensions.

The strategic logic of integration lies in generating mutually reinforcing effects. Military capabilities help establish the security conditions within which diplomacy, trade, governance, and information activities can operate effectively, while diplomatic legitimacy, economic

resources, and informational influence strengthen the credibility and sustainability of military action. History shows the enduring importance of this relationship. Roman military power secured communication routes and enabled effective governance, while Britain's rise as a global power depended not only on naval superiority but also on integrating military strength with commercial networks, financial institutions, and diplomatic partnerships (Kennedy 1987). In each case, long-term strategic success resulted from aligning military capability with broader national resources and political objectives.

In the contemporary security environment, military forces continue to provide the secure framework within which other instruments of power can operate. Protecting maritime lines of communication, air routes, space-based systems, and cyber infrastructure supports international trade, diplomatic engagement, and economic stability (Till 2018; Nye 2011). Military power contributes to strategic influence both directly and indirectly by enabling the effective employment of other national capabilities.

Integration also increases strategic leverage by linking coercive and persuasive measures. Diplomatic initiatives and economic sanctions gain credibility when supported by visible military capabilities, while military signalling is more effective when embedded within coherent diplomatic and political strategies. During the Cold War, NATO's military posture reinforced the broader strategy of containment, while economic recovery programmes such as the Marshall Plan strengthened alliance cohesion and political legitimacy (Gaddis 2005a). Similarly, contemporary sanctions regimes gain additional influence from credible military options that reinforce diplomatic and economic pressure (Art and Greenhill 2018a).

Beyond deterrence and coercion, integration enables states to exert continuous influence below the threshold of armed conflict. Security cooperation, military assistance, joint exercises, capacity-building programmes, and humanitarian assistance operations combine military capabilities with diplomatic engagement and strategic communication. These activities enhance partnerships, strengthen legitimacy, and support crisis management while reducing the likelihood of escalation. Humanitarian and disaster-relief operations provide a clear example: military logistics, engineering, and medical capabilities deliver immediate assistance while reinforcing international cooperation and political goodwill.

Military power should be understood as part of a broader system of national influence rather than an isolated instrument. As Gray (1999) argues, effective strategy requires the alignment of political purpose and practical capability. Military power provides the coercive foundation that underpins national objectives, but its enduring strategic effectiveness depends upon integration with diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments. Through such integration, military capability contributes not only to defence and deterrence but also to sustained influence, reassurance, and the achievement of long-term political objectives.

3.7. Escalatory Potential and Risk

A distinctive characteristic of military power is its inherent potential to generate escalation. Unlike diplomatic, informational, or economic instruments, military actions produce immediate and visible effects that directly influence adversary perceptions, decision-making, and behaviour. As a result, even limited military activities may trigger responses that extend beyond the original intentions of the actors involved. Escalation so arises not only from the destructive potential of military force but also from how military actions are perceived and interpreted within a given strategic context. In an era of multidomain operations, rapid information flows, and persistent strategic competition, managing escalation has become an essential element of military effectiveness rather than merely an operational consideration.

One important source of escalation risk is misperception. Military exercises, force movements, readiness measures, and routine deployments are often intended as deterrent or defensive actions, yet others may interpret them as preparations for offensive operations. Historical mistrust, incomplete information, and differing strategic cultures can amplify such misunderstandings. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, reconnaissance activities and military preparations contributed to heightened perceptions of imminent attack, illustrating how uncertainty can rapidly intensify crises even when no party initially seeks escalation (Jervis 1976).

Escalation is also driven by action-reaction dynamics commonly associated with the security dilemma. Measures one state takes to improve its security, such as force modernisation, enhanced readiness, or forward deployments, may be perceived by others as threatening, prompting reciprocal responses. These cycles can increase tension, reduce trust, and narrow opportunities for diplomatic engagement. Contemporary military competition in Eastern Europe following Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates how deterrence measures, reinforcement activities, and force-posture adjustments have generated ongoing patterns of mutual military adaptation.

The risk of escalation is further amplified by the increasingly interconnected nature of modern conflict. Military activities in one domain can affect others, allowing crises to spread both geographically and functionally. Incidents at sea, along borders, in cyberspace, or in space may generate consequences that extend well beyond their original scope. Cyber operations against critical infrastructure, for example, may provoke conventional military responses, while interference with space-based capabilities could affect strategic command-and-control arrangements. Such multidomain interactions increase crisis-management complexity and complicate escalation control.

Technological advances also compress decision-making timelines. Precision-strike systems, integrated sensor networks, cyber capabilities, and AI-enabled decision-support tools provide greater responsiveness and operational reach but simultaneously reduce warning time for political and military leaders. The 1983 NATO Able Archer exercise showed how high-readiness activities can be misinterpreted under strategic tension, increasing the risk of unintended escalation. As decision windows shorten, the risks of miscalculation, misunderstanding, and premature action inevitably increase (Freedman 2013).

Managing escalation requires effective command-and-control arrangements, clear political guidance, and robust communication mechanisms. Crisis communication channels, deconfliction procedures, established rules of engagement, and clearly articulated policy objectives help reduce ambiguity and support strategic stability. Military signalling must remain consistent with political intent, ensuring relevant audiences understand deterrent and defensive actions as such.

The escalatory potential of military power should be regarded as both a source of strategic influence and a significant responsibility. The same capabilities that strengthen deterrence, responsiveness, and coercive leverage can also generate instability if employed without effective control. Thence, successful military forces must balance operational agility with disciplined escalation management, enabling them to achieve strategic objectives while minimising the risk of unintended conflict and preserving political control over the use of force (Gray 1999; Freedman 2013).

3.8. Adaptability, Learning, and Institutional Evolution

History consistently shows that adaptable military organisations better maintain effectiveness, preserve credibility, and exploit emerging opportunities, whereas rigid institutions often struggle to cope with changing forms of warfare (Murray and Millett 1996). Adaptability contributes directly to deterrence, operational effectiveness, and long-term strategic relevance.

Military adaptation begins at the tactical level, where combat experience, exercises, experimentation, and technological innovation generate new approaches to military operations. Throughout history, effective military forces have refined tactics in response to changing conditions. Roman legions adapted their methods to diverse operational environments, while Prussian military reforms improved the integration of manoeuvre and firepower. More recently, the Israel Defence Forces adapted urban warfare tactics following operations in Lebanon and Gaza, enhancing coordination between ground and air elements. Such examples illustrate how tactical innovation enables military forces to maintain initiative and effectiveness in dynamic operational environments (Cohen 2012).

The strategic value of tactical learning depends on translating it into doctrine, training, and operational planning. Successful military organisations institutionalise lessons learned, converting operational experience into standardised procedures and enduring military concepts. The United States Army's development of combined-arms doctrine after the Second World War shows how operational lessons can be integrated into coherent frameworks that improve military effectiveness across campaigns. Conversely, military forces that fail to adapt doctrine to changing conditions risk reduced effectiveness, regardless of their available resources. Contemporary counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan further illustrate how operational learning can shape doctrine, training, and force employment in complex security environments.

Adaptability also extends to organisational structures, command arrangements, logistics systems, professional military education (PME), and civil-military relations. Effective military forces continuously adjust institutions, resources, and force structures to support evolving operational requirements (Van Creveld 1991; Kohn 2002). Post-war reforms within the United States Navy, including integrating carrier-based power projection with advanced C4ISR capabilities, enhanced operational flexibility and joint effectiveness. More recently, Ukraine's military forces demonstrated significant adaptability during Russia's 2022 invasion through integrating unmanned systems, decentralised command arrangements, and innovative employment of precision fires. Such changes illustrate how institutional evolution enables military organisations to translate operational lessons into enduring capabilities.

This adaptive capacity depends upon effective learning mechanisms. Professional military education, exercises, wargaming, after-action reviews, and lessons-learned processes develop critical thinking and promote organisational learning (Snider 2008a; Cohen 2012). Decentralised command approaches, particularly mission command and the principles associated with *Auftragstaktik*, further enhance adaptability by encouraging initiative and informed decision-making at lower levels of command (Echevarria 2000). Equally important are institutional cultures that support critical assessment, innovation, and constructive reform.

In the contemporary security environment, characterised by rapid technological change, multidomain operations, cyber threats, and intensified strategic competition, adaptability has become essential to military power. Military forces that can learn, innovate, and evolve are better positioned to maintain operational effectiveness and strategic credibility amid uncertainty. Accordingly, adaptability should be understood not as a supplementary attribute

but as a core characteristic of military power that enables military forces to remain effective, relevant, and responsive over time.

3.9. Sustainability and Endurance

A defining characteristic of military power is its capacity to endure over time. While responsiveness enables military forces to generate immediate effects, sustainability determines whether those effects can be maintained and translated into lasting strategic outcomes. Military power depends not only upon combat capability but also upon the ability to sustain operations, absorb losses, regenerate resources, and remain effective throughout prolonged periods of competition, crisis, or conflict. Historically, endurance has often proven more decisive than initial battlefield success, making sustainability a critical foundation of military credibility and strategic influence (Van Creveld 1977; Kennedy 1987).

At its core, sustainability rests upon the mobilisation and maintenance of military, industrial, and logistical resources. Manpower, defence-industrial capacity, supply chains, transportation networks, maintenance systems, and logistical support determine whether military forces can continue operations over extended periods. Historical experience repeatedly demonstrates the importance of these factors. Roman military effectiveness depended upon extensive logistical networks and standardised support systems, while Allied success during the Second World War was sustained by superior industrial production and global logistics. Conversely, Germany's inability to match Allied economic and industrial endurance ultimately undermined its early operational achievements (Kennedy 1987). In the contemporary security environment, sustainability also depends upon resilient energy supplies, cyber infrastructure, space-based assets, and the industrial capacity required to support advanced military technologies and multidomain operations.

Sustainability is equally a political and societal phenomenon. Military operations can be sustained only with sufficient political legitimacy, public support, and national resilience. History shows that strategic outcomes are often shaped as much by societal endurance as by battlefield performance. Russia's collapse during the First World War reflected political and social exhaustion as much as military setbacks, while Britain's ability to sustain prolonged conflict depended upon strong institutions, economic capacity, and societal commitment (Kennedy 1987). More recently, Ukraine's continued resistance following Russia's 2022 invasion has demonstrated the importance of combining military resilience with national mobilisation, political cohesion, and external support.

In contemporary strategic competition, sustainability often takes the form of long-term readiness rather than continuous combat. States must maintain military capabilities, alliances, force posture, technological modernisation, and operational preparedness over decades. The Cold War illustrated this form of strategic endurance, requiring sustained investment, alliance management, and credible deterrence without direct confrontation between major powers (Gaddis 2005a).

Sustainability and endurance transform military power from a temporary capability into a durable instrument of national influence. By linking operational effectiveness with industrial capacity, political legitimacy, societal resilience, and institutional strength, they ensure that military power remains credible and effective over time. Thus, sustainability is essential to military power, enabling states to withstand shocks, manage prolonged crises, support deterrence, and maintain strategic influence in an increasingly complex and competitive security environment.

3.10. Legitimacy and Normative Constraint

Although military power derives its distinctive character from the organised capacity to employ force, its effectiveness depends significantly upon legitimacy and adherence to accepted norms. Military actions are assessed not only by their operational outcomes but also by their legal, political, and moral justification. Accordingly, legitimacy shapes how domestic populations, allies, adversaries, and the wider international community perceive military power, influencing the degree to which military action generates support, deterrence, compliance, or resistance. As a result, legitimacy enables military credibility, sustainability, alliance cohesion, and long-term strategic influence.

Legitimacy strengthens military effectiveness by increasing political support and reducing the costs of using force. Throughout history, military power has achieved its greatest impact when aligned with widely accepted political objectives and governing principles. Whether derived from legal authority, national defence, collective security, or international consensus, perceived legitimacy enhances freedom of action and reinforces public and allied support. Contemporary examples demonstrate this dynamic. NATO operations in Kosovo (1999) and Libya (2011) benefited from broad international support and political justification, while the 2003 intervention in Iraq faced persistent legitimacy challenges that affected coalition cohesion and strategic outcomes despite initial military success (Finnemore 2003).

At the same time, legitimacy imposes important constraints on the employment of military power. International law, the principles of proportionality and distinction, state sovereignty, and broader normative expectations influence both strategic decision-making and military operations. Failure to observe these standards can undermine political objectives, weaken alliances, and erode strategic credibility, even where military operations achieve their immediate goals (Kaldor 2012; Finnemore 2003). Legitimacy should therefore be understood not simply as a moral consideration but as a practical factor that affects the effectiveness and sustainability of military action.

The importance of legitimacy has increased further in the contemporary information environment. Real-time media coverage, digital communications, social networks, and international legal scrutiny make military operations visible to global audiences almost immediately. As a result, states increasingly integrate strategic communications, information activities, and legal arguments into the employment of military power. Military actions are evaluated not only for their physical effects but also for the narratives and perceptions they generate. Recent conflicts, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, illustrate how information campaigns, legal framing, and international diplomacy have become integral components of maintaining political support and shaping international perceptions.

Legitimacy and normative constraint do not diminish military power; rather, they shape its strategic effectiveness. Military force that is perceived as legitimate is more likely to sustain political support, reinforce alliances, preserve freedom of action, and achieve enduring strategic effects. Thus, legitimacy remains a fundamental characteristic of military power, linking military capability with political purpose and ensuring that the use of force contributes to sustainable and credible strategic outcomes.

3.11. Friction, Uncertainty, and Imperfect Control

As Clausewitz (1976) observed, chance, incomplete information, human error, and adversaries' adaptive behaviour shape military operations. No matter how carefully planned, military actions remain vulnerable to unforeseen events and unintended consequences. Weather, terrain,

technical failures, communication breakdowns, and adversary responses can all disrupt operations and alter outcomes. Unlike many diplomatic or economic measures, military actions often occur under severe time constraints, reducing opportunities for adjustment and increasing the potential impact of miscalculation.

History shows the enduring influence of friction in warfare. During the Normandy landings in 1944, Allied forces encountered unexpected navigational difficulties, environmental challenges, and stronger-than-anticipated resistance. Success was achieved not through perfect execution but through adaptability, redundancy, and effective command arrangements. Conversely, the difficulties experienced by United States forces in adapting to irregular warfare in Vietnam illustrated how rigid concepts and assumptions can reduce operational effectiveness. These examples highlight that military success depends not on eliminating uncertainty, but on the ability to operate effectively despite it.

Technological advances have reduced some traditional sources of friction while creating new ones. Precision-guided munitions, advanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, unmanned systems, and networked command-and-control (C2) architectures have improved situational awareness and accelerated decision-making. At the same time, modern military operations have become increasingly dependent on complex technological systems that may be vulnerable to cyberattacks, electronic warfare, deception, technical failure, or communication disruption. The war in Ukraine since 2022 illustrates both the advantages of advanced technologies and the continuing influence of logistical challenges, battlefield uncertainty, and rapid adaptation by opposing forces.

Friction is also amplified by the multidomain character of contemporary military operations. Activities in the land, maritime, air, cyber, space, and information domains are increasingly interconnected, so disruption in one domain can affect others. Commanders must make decisions in environments characterised by incomplete, contested, or potentially misleading information.

Effective military forces seek to manage rather than eliminate friction. Mission command, decentralised execution, professional military education (PME), realistic exercises, wargaming, contingency planning, and lessons-learned processes all help military organisations adapt to uncertainty and maintain operational effectiveness (Echevarria 2000; Cohen 2012). Redundant communications, resilient C2 systems, and clearly articulated commander's intent further enhance forces' ability to operate when plans are disrupted.

Friction, uncertainty, and imperfect control therefore remain inherent features of military power. While they limit the predictability and effectiveness of military action, they also reinforce the importance of adaptability, professional competence, and resilient institutions. So, the ability to operate successfully under conditions of uncertainty remains one of the most important determinants of military effectiveness and strategic success.

Conclusion

The analysis of the key characteristics of military power demonstrates that military power cannot be reduced to the quantity of forces, weapons, or technological capabilities available to a state. Its strategic effectiveness emerges from the interaction of political authority, military force, and societal commitment, reflecting Clausewitz's trinity of reason, chance, and passion. Political authority determines the objectives, legitimacy, and conditions for employing military power; military force provides the organised means to pursue those objectives; and society provides the resilience, support, and willingness to sustain the costs of competition and conflict (Fleming 2013).

Viewed through this framework, the chapter's characteristics fall into three analytical clusters. The political authority dimension encompasses the integration of military power with other instruments of national power, the management of escalatory potential and risk, legitimacy and normative constraint, and the psychological and symbolic effects generated by military posture and action. These characteristics demonstrate that military power derives its strategic meaning from political purpose and that its effectiveness depends upon maintaining coherence between political objectives, military action, signalling, legitimacy, and escalation control.

The military force dimension comprises the potential for organised violence; coercive and protective roles; credibility; military responsiveness and rapid-effect capabilities; adaptability and institutional learning; and the ability to operate under friction, uncertainty, and imperfect control. Together, these characteristics define the military instrument itself: its capacity to generate and sustain effects, respond rapidly to changing circumstances, adapt to evolving forms of conflict, and translate available capabilities into credible strategic outcomes. Importantly, military effectiveness depends not on technology or force structure alone, but on their integration with doctrine, leadership, organisation, readiness, sustainment, and professional competence.

The population dimension is represented principally by sustainability and endurance. Military power must generate immediate effects, but its strategic value ultimately depends on the capacity to sustain operations, absorb losses, regenerate resources, and maintain political and societal commitment over time. Sustainability therefore links military capacity to industrial resources, logistics, political legitimacy, national resilience, and society's willingness to bear the costs of prolonged competition or conflict.

These clusters should not, however, be understood as mutually exclusive. Several characteristics—particularly credibility, legitimacy, psychological and symbolic impact, escalation management, and sustainability—span more than one element of the trinity. This cross-cutting nature is essential because military power is ultimately a relational and systemic phenomenon rather than a collection of independent attributes. The effectiveness of one characteristic may depend upon the presence of others: capabilities require credibility, credibility requires political resolve and societal support, and sustained military action requires both military capacity and political legitimacy.

Accordingly, the principal conclusion is that military power achieves strategic effect when the three elements of Clausewitz's trinity remain mutually reinforcing and aligned. Political purpose must be matched by credible, adaptable military means, and both must be sustained by legitimate political authority and sufficient societal resilience. When this alignment weakens, military capabilities may fail to generate the intended strategic effects, regardless of their quantitative or technological sophistication. Military power should therefore be understood as a dynamic interaction between political purpose, military capability, and societal commitment, through which states convert military potential into credible, sustainable, and strategically relevant power.

4. STRATEGIC COMPETITION: CONTINUUM, DYNAMICS, AND INTERACTION

The complexity of evolving strategic environments has compelled scholars and practitioners to reconceptualise conflict and the spectrum of state engagement. Historically, conflict was understood in discrete phases: diplomacy in peacetime, mobilisation during crisis, and formal hostilities in war. This binary framework underpinned much of classical strategic thought, from Clausewitzian conceptions of war as a bounded event to Cold War models of escalation management (Clausewitz 1976; Schelling 1966). In the twenty-first century, however, the distinction between “war” and “peace” has become increasingly inadequate. Globalisation, technological diffusion, and the proliferation of grey-zone strategies have blurred these boundaries, producing a continuous and multifaceted process of strategic interaction that unfolds across political, military, economic, informational, and technological domains (Gray 2013; Mazarr 2015).

Strategic competition has expanded beyond narrowly defined military rivalry into a comprehensive process encompassing economic, diplomatic, informational, and technological dimensions. Even during the Cold War, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union combined intense military and ideological confrontation with diplomacy, arms control, and selective cooperation, illustrating that strategic interaction was never purely zero-sum (Gaddis 2005a). Deterrence, reassurance, and crisis management coexisted alongside competition, revealing early forms of what would later be conceptualised as a competition continuum.

After the Cold War and the rise of new and resurgent powers, most notably China and Russia, strategic competition has diversified in form and intensity. Contemporary rivalry now routinely involves cyber operations, technological races, economic coercion, legal and normative contestation, and information warfare, often alongside traditional military posturing (Libicki 2007; Nye 2011). These developments have rendered earlier peace–war dichotomies insufficient, as states increasingly pursue strategic objectives through actions deliberately calibrated to remain below the threshold of open armed conflict.

The multidomain character of modern competition underscores that military power remains central, but it is rarely employed in isolation. Diplomatic engagement, military signalling, cyber activities, and economic measures unfold in parallel, shaping strategic environments cumulatively rather than episodically. This reality reinforces the necessity of a comprehensive approach in which military power is integrated with other instruments of national power to achieve long-term strategic objectives (Gray 1999).

4.1. The Competition Continuum

The competition continuum concept provides a useful framework for understanding this expanded spectrum of strategic engagement. Rather than viewing international relations as a linear progression from peace to war, the continuum recognises overlapping activities that span cooperation, competition, crisis, and conflict, often occurring simultaneously (Gray 2013; Mazarr 2015). Many of these activities take place below the threshold of armed conflict yet carry significant strategic consequences.

Key activities along the competition continuum span political, military, informational, and economic domains and often unfold at the same time. Integrated political–military signalling plays a central role, as adjustments to force posture, joint exercises, and forward deployments communicate resolve and shape adversary expectations. NATO’s rotational presence in Eastern

Europe illustrates how limited, calibrated military deployments can reassure allies while signalling deterrence to competitors (Gaddis 2005a).

Alongside visible military signalling, cyber and information operations have become persistent features of strategic interaction, operating even during periods of nominal peace. These activities shape perceptions, influence decision-making, and undermine adversaries' cohesion and legitimacy without crossing traditional thresholds of armed conflict. Russian hybrid operations in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022 exemplify the strategic use of cyber intrusions, disinformation, and indirect actions as instruments of influence below the level of conventional war (Jervis 1976; Libicki 2007).

States also employ proxy and irregular warfare as a means of coercion that limits escalation risk while extending strategic reach. By leveraging non-state actors and indirect methods, states can impose costs and shape outcomes without assuming full responsibility for escalation. Iran's use of proxy networks across the Middle East illustrates how such approaches enable sustained influence while maintaining plausible deniability and strategic flexibility (Mahnken 2010).

Finally, diplomatic, economic, and technological measures are increasingly coordinated with military initiatives to generate cumulative strategic effects. China's approach in the South China Sea, which combines economic incentives, legal claims, diplomatic pressure, and maritime assertiveness, demonstrates how non-military instruments can reinforce military presence and gradually reshape strategic realities without decisive confrontation (Allison 2017). Within this continuum, cooperation and competition are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they coexist and interact, producing a dynamic environment in which states continuously manoeuvre to shape influence, manage risk, and secure advantage.

Strategic Competition as a Persistent and Interactive Process

Strategic competition is neither episodic nor static; it is continuous, interactive, and often non-linear. Military, diplomatic, and informational actions generate feedback loops that provoke responses, reshape perceptions, and alter the strategic environment over time (Jervis 1976). NATO's forward presence, for example, is perceived by allies as stabilising and reassuring, yet Russia interprets it as strategic encirclement, illustrating how divergent perceptions can create asymmetric escalation risks.

The multidomain character of modern competition amplifies these dynamics. Actions in cyberspace, space, or the information environment can alter strategic conditions rapidly without triggering traditional military thresholds. Cyber intrusions targeting critical infrastructure or intelligence systems may provoke countermeasures, sanctions, or military signalling without direct kinetic confrontation, demonstrating how competition evolves through indirect and incremental interactions (Libicki 2007).

As Gray (1999) argues, such competition is rooted in enduring power distributions, security dilemmas, and geopolitical rivalries rather than discrete crises alone. Managing this environment requires sophisticated statecraft: the ability to balance cooperation, competition, and selective restraint while coordinating multiple instruments of power over extended time horizons (Nye 2011).

Interrelated Elements: Interests, Influence, Advantage, and Leverage

Strategic competition is structured by four interrelated elements, interests, influence, advantage, and leverage, that together shape state behaviour across the competition continuum. Interests define what is at stake, encompassing core values and priorities such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, economic stability, and national identity, and they guide how states allocate attention

and resources. Influence refers to the capacity to shape others' behaviour through coercion, persuasion, or indirect means, ranging from military signalling and diplomatic pressure to economic incentives and cyber operations.

Advantage reflects superiority in position, capability, or resources, whether military, technological, economic, or cognitive, that enables a state to shape outcomes and constrain adversary choices. Leverage, in turn, is the strategic application of influence and advantage to generate specific effects, compelling adversaries or partners to act in ways consistent with one's interests. These elements do not operate independently; rather, they interact dynamically, reinforcing or constraining one another over time.

China's maritime expansion in the South China Sea illustrates this alignment clearly. Territorial claims define core interests, while persistent coercive presence and legal assertions generate influence. Modern naval and coast guard capabilities provide operational and positional advantages, which are then converted into leverage through economic inducements and diplomatic pressure. Similarly, Russia's hybrid operations in Eastern Europe exploit combinations of influence, advantage, and leverage below the threshold of open conflict to advance strategic objectives while managing escalation risk (Mahnken 2010).

Operational and Strategic Implications

The dynamics of strategic competition demonstrate that military power is most effective when integrated with diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments. Contemporary cases illustrate how states generate influence and advantage without resorting to large-scale conventional war. China, for example, combines military posturing with economic leverage and sustained diplomatic pressure in the South China Sea, gradually reshaping the strategic environment without decisive confrontation. Russia similarly integrates information warfare, cyber operations, and proxy forces across Ukraine and Eastern Europe, employing indirect and deniable methods to advance strategic objectives while managing escalation risks. Iran's regional strategy follows a comparable pattern, relying on proxy networks, coercive diplomacy, and cyber capabilities to project influence beyond its immediate borders.

The emergence of A2/AD strategies shows how states seek advantage across the competition continuum. Rather than pursuing decisive battle, these approaches emphasise persistent shaping, resilience, and multidomain integration to constrain adversary options and manage escalation. As such, denial and access strategies have become central instruments of influence in contemporary great-power competition.

Taken together, these cases reinforce the conclusion that strategic competition is not won through singular decisive actions, but through sustained positioning, multidomain readiness, and continuous anticipation of adversarial adaptation (Gray 2013; Mazarr 2015). Armed forces must therefore maintain persistent, adaptive postures while ensuring military activities remain aligned with broader national objectives and coordinated with other instruments of statecraft.

To enhance strategic effectiveness and maintain a persistent advantage, military and national leaders must internalise continuum thinking within strategic planning and operational design. This requires conceptualising state action across cooperation, competition, and conflict simultaneously, while retaining the flexibility to adjust posture and instruments as circumstances evolve. Strategic effectiveness further depends on enhancing multidomain readiness by ensuring that cyber, space, information, and conventional forces are coordinated, resilient, and mutually reinforcing, allowing national objectives to be pursued coherently across domains.

Developing and sustaining a persistent global presence remains equally critical. Forward deployments, regular exercises, and calibrated signalling reassure allies, deter adversaries, and continuously shape perceptions in contested environments. At the same time, states must invest in adaptive intelligence capabilities and innovation ecosystems that monitor adversary behaviour, track emerging technologies, and identify systemic vulnerabilities, thereby preserving informational and technological advantages over time.

Finally, effective competition along the continuum requires strengthened interagency and allied coordination. Military actions must be aligned with diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments to generate cumulative strategic effects through whole-of-government integration and alliance cohesion. Only through such coordination can states translate tactical actions into a durable strategic advantage within a persistent and interactive competitive environment.

This section has shown that strategic competition in the contemporary era cannot be understood through episodic or binary models of peace and war. Instead, competition unfolds as a continuous, interactive process spanning cooperation, rivalry, crisis, and conflict, often simultaneously and across multiple domains. As Gray (1999; 2013) emphasises, strategy is not confined to moments of armed confrontation but operates persistently as states seek to shape their security environments, influence adversaries, and secure advantage over time. The competition continuum thus reflects not a departure from classical strategy, but its adaptation to conditions of technological diffusion, globalisation, and multidomain interaction.

The evolution of strategic competition demonstrates that military power remains central, yet rarely decisive in isolation. Rather, its effectiveness depends on integration with diplomatic, economic, informational, and technological instruments, allowing states to pursue objectives below the threshold of war while preserving escalation control (Mazarr 2015; Nye 2011). Contemporary cases, from NATO's forward presence in Eastern Europe to China's incremental expansion in the South China Sea and Russia's hybrid activities in Ukraine, show how influence and advantage increasingly emerge through calibrated, persistent actions rather than decisive battles (Gaddis 2005a; Mahnken 2010).

Crucially, strategic competition is interactive and perception-driven. Actions intended as reassurance or deterrence may be interpreted as provocation, generating feedback loops that reshape the strategic environment in unpredictable ways (Jervis 1976). The multidomain character of modern competition further amplifies this dynamic: cyber operations, information campaigns, and economic measures can rapidly alter strategic conditions without crossing traditional military thresholds yet still carry escalation risks (Libicki 2007). Managing competition therefore requires not only capability, but interpretive awareness, signalling discipline, and institutional coordination.

The framework of interests, influence, advantage, and leverage provides a useful lens for understanding how states navigate this environment. Interests define what is at stake; influence shapes behaviour; advantage creates asymmetry; and leverage translates position into effect (Allison 2017). These elements operate relationally rather than independently, reinforcing the insight that strategic competition is less about maximising isolated gains than about shaping relative positions over time (Posen 1984; Mearsheimer 2001).

In sum, strategic competition today is best understood as continuous statecraft rather than episodic conflict. Success depends on the ability to operate across the competition continuum, integrate instruments of national power, manage interaction and escalation, and sustain advantage in a dynamic and contested environment. For NATO, the United States, and their allies, this implies that strategic effectiveness will hinge not on decisive military victory alone,

but on persistent positioning, adaptive coordination, and the disciplined management of competition below and above the threshold of armed conflict.

Contemporary strategic competition unfolds along a continuum rather than within clearly demarcated phases of peace and war. States pursue their interests through overlapping patterns of cooperation, competition below the threshold of armed conflict, and, when required, open warfare. These modes are neither sequential nor mutually exclusive; instead, they coexist and interact dynamically, shaped by political objectives, relative power balances, and escalation constraints. Understanding this continuum is essential, as military forces and other instruments of national power must operate across all three modes simultaneously to shape the strategic environment and generate cumulative advantage (Gray 2013).

4.2. Cooperation

Within the strategic competition continuum, cooperation functions not merely as a stabilising activity but as a deliberate mechanism of strategic shaping. Through cooperation, states, alliances, and partnerships advance shared objectives, manage uncertainty, and influence the strategic environment in ways that constrain adversary behaviour while limiting escalation risks. Cooperation enables states to accumulate influence, reinforce legitimacy, and establish favourable conditions for competition and, if necessary, conflict. Rather than representing an alternative to competition, cooperation constitutes a foundational mode through which competitive advantage is generated over time (Gray 2013; Nye 2011).

Military cooperation is typically continuous and multidomain, integrating land, maritime, air, cyber, space, and informational activities. Although centred on defence and security, cooperative engagement frequently extends beyond narrowly military objectives to include diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian dimensions. This breadth allows cooperation to produce cumulative strategic effects by shaping perceptions, enhancing resilience, and reinforcing collective security without reliance on overt coercion or escalation.

Forms of Cooperation

Cooperation within the strategic competition continuum takes many forms, including military and non-military practices. These forms represent practical mechanisms through which states shape both the operational and strategic environment:

Security Cooperation and Capacity-Building

Military assistance, training initiatives, and advisory missions enhance the capabilities, professionalism, and institutional resilience of allied and partner forces, particularly in fragile or contested regions. Capacity-building efforts strengthen local defence institutions while fostering long-term strategic alignment and burden sharing. As demonstrated across alliance and partnership frameworks, empowering partners increases deterrence credibility, mitigates instability, and reduces incentives for competition to escalate into armed conflict (Kennedy 1987; Gray 1999).

Joint Operations and Exercises

Multinational training and exercises enhance interoperability, trust, and readiness among allied and partner forces. Regular combined activities test command arrangements, logistics, and deployment concepts while reinforcing shared operational standards. Beyond their technical value, such exercises signal cohesion and resolve, shaping adversary perceptions and reinforcing deterrence through visible collective capability (Jervis 1976).

Maritime Security, Counter-Piracy, and Counterterrorism

Cooperative maritime and counterterrorism operations protect critical global commons and suppress non-state threats without escalating interstate conflict. Operations such as the EU-led Operation Atalanta illustrate how multinational coalitions can secure vital sea lines of communication and global trade routes while reinforcing norms of collective security. These activities generate strategic stability by addressing shared threats below the threshold of great-power confrontation.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

Military cooperation plays a critical role in responding to natural disasters and humanitarian crises, where speed, logistics, and coordination are decisive. Beyond alleviating immediate suffering, humanitarian operations enhance legitimacy, build trust, and strengthen long-term partnerships by demonstrating responsiveness and solidarity. Operations following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, during which Japan's Self-Defence Forces worked closely with U.S. forces, illustrate how such cooperation can deliver humanitarian outcomes while reinforcing durable political and security relationships. Historical experience thus shows that humanitarian assistance and disaster relief function not only as crisis-response mechanisms but also as indirect instruments of strategic influence, contributing to sustained partnership cohesion and normative legitimacy (Finnemore 2003; Sullivan and Chiyomatsu 2012).

Peacekeeping and Stabilisation Missions

Peacekeeping and stabilisation missions conducted under international or regional mandates contribute to conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery by supporting security provision, governance reconstruction, and institutional reform. Multinational deployments distribute risk and responsibility among participating states while sustaining order in contested environments, thereby reducing the likelihood of renewed violence. NATO-led operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan, alongside United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa, illustrate how cooperative military engagement can reinforce regional stability and support long-term political recovery without relying on unilateral force, demonstrating the strategic value of cooperation in managing fragile security environments (Kaldor 2012).

While these forms of cooperation differ in function and domain, their strategic effectiveness depends on several common enabling conditions:

Shared Strategic Understanding: Effective cooperation requires aligning tactical activities with long-term political objectives. Partners must share basic assumptions regarding threats, priorities, and desired end states. Without such alignment, cooperative activities risk fragmentation or strategic incoherence, undermining their cumulative effect (Gray 2013; Jervis 1976).

Flexibility and Adaptability: Cooperative frameworks must remain adaptable to shifting threats, adversary behaviour, and technological change. As competition increasingly extends into cyber, informational, and cognitive domains, cooperation must evolve accordingly. Adaptability enables sustained relevance and prevents cooperative mechanisms from becoming strategically obsolete (Libicki 2007; Mazarr 2015).

Integration with Other Instruments of National Power: Military cooperation is most effective when synchronised with diplomatic, economic, informational, and legal instruments. Integrated statecraft allows states to generate cumulative strategic effects by aligning military activity with broader political and normative efforts. Such integration ensures coherence between operational

actions and long-term objectives, enabling states to shape the strategic environment persistently rather than through episodic uses of force (Gray 2013; Nye 2011).

Long-Term Relationship Building: Sustained cooperation depends on trust, predictability, and institutional continuity. Regular exercises, professional exchanges, and structured dialogue reduce misperception and enhance mutual confidence. Over time, these mechanisms produce strategic resilience by embedding cooperation within enduring political and military relationships (Binnendijk 2015).

When effectively implemented, military cooperation shapes the strategic environment well before crises emerge. Forward deployments, interoperability, and persistent engagement enable rapid response while signalling unity and resolve. Even in predominantly cooperative contexts, military forces influence adversary calculations by increasing the perceived costs of aggression and narrowing escalation pathways.

Cooperation also lets states manage security challenges without immediately resorting to force. Strategic partnerships deter adversaries by presenting credible, collective capabilities, while preserving flexibility and political legitimacy. Through sustained engagement, military cooperation subtly redistributes risk, reinforces deterrence, and supports long-term strategic objectives within an increasingly interconnected and competitive global system.

Cooperation constitutes the foundational layer of strategic competition, enabling states and their allies to advance shared interests, deter aggression, and manage uncertainty across the continuum of interaction. While not always overtly coercive, cooperation systematically shapes the strategic environment by building resilience, reinforcing legitimacy, and preparing forces for escalation without making conflict inevitable. From humanitarian assistance to collective defence, cooperation enhances strategic positioning and alliance cohesion, ensuring that states are better prepared to navigate competition below armed conflict and, if required, transition effectively to higher levels of confrontation.

4.3. Competition Below the Threshold of Armed Conflict

Competition below the threshold of armed conflict, often referred to as grey-zone competition, represents a deliberate and continuous form of strategic interaction in which states employ military, diplomatic, economic, informational, and other instruments to achieve political objectives without escalating to open warfare (Mazarr 2015; Hoffman 2007). This domain challenges traditional definitions of conflict, as actions deliberately blur the boundaries between peace and war, exploit ambiguity, and use indirect or asymmetric methods to shape the strategic environment without provoking overt military responses (Johnson 2016; Nagl 2002).

Grey-zone operations are constrained by legal, political, and operational considerations and often involve a mix of state forces, proxies, and partner actors. They are characterised by their persistence, adaptability, and focus on incremental influence rather than decisive battlefield outcomes (Mazarr 2015; Finnemore 2003). By operating below the level of conventional conflict, states can gradually shift the strategic balance in their favour, manage escalation risks, and shape adversary behaviour over extended periods.

Activities and Methods

Military and non-military instruments are integrated in grey-zone competition to generate strategic effects without triggering full-scale armed conflict (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 1997; of calibrated activities designed to gain, maintain, or disrupt influence in contested environments while managing escalation risk.

Operational activity in the grey zone often includes offensive, defensive, and stabilisation operations directed at critical infrastructure, command-and-control networks, and key strategic nodes. These actions are intended to shape local power balances by reinforcing friendly actors, constraining adversaries, or selectively destabilising existing arrangements. By targeting the connective tissue of political and security systems rather than massed forces, such operations allow states to project power and influence without engaging in overt confrontation or crossing established thresholds of armed conflict (Mazarr 2015).

Security cooperation and military information support operations constitute another central method of grey-zone competition. Military information support operations, including psychological operations, media campaigns, and public diplomacy, are designed to shape perceptions, influence decision-making, and erode adversary cohesion while reinforcing favourable narratives among domestic, allied, and neutral audiences. These activities are employed across a wide range of contexts, from counter-narcotics and humanitarian assistance to stabilisation missions and military interventions, enabling states to affect outcomes indirectly and persistently without resorting to conventional combat (Hoffman 2007).

Special operations forces, cyber operations, and space-based capabilities further expand the range of tools available below the threshold of war. Special operations forces provide flexible, low-visibility means of influencing adversary behaviour through training, advising, reconnaissance, and limited direct action. Cyber operations can disrupt critical infrastructure, compromise sensitive information, or manipulate information environments, while space-based capabilities enable or degrade communications, navigation, and intelligence systems. Together, these tools offer high-impact effects with a limited physical footprint, allowing states to pursue strategic objectives unconventionally and often with plausible deniability (Libicki 2007).

Finally, diplomatic, economic, and intelligence measures are closely coordinated with military activity to amplify coercive pressure and shape adversary calculations. Sanctions, trade restrictions, intelligence operations, and diplomatic isolation reinforce military actions by increasing costs, narrowing strategic options, and signalling resolve. When applied in a coordinated manner across multiple instruments of national power, these measures magnify strategic impact while remaining deliberately below the threshold of open armed conflict (Hoffman 2007).

Defining Characteristics

Grey-zone competition has distinguishing characteristics that separate it from conventional warfare and make it particularly well suited to evolving strategic environments. Foremost among these is the deliberate use of ambiguity and denial. Actions are designed to be opaque, complicating attribution and delaying political or military responses. By employing proxies, private military contractors, irregular forces, or cyber operatives, states create plausible deniability and blur the boundaries between state and non-state activity. This ambiguity is not incidental but central to grey-zone strategy, as it maximises influence while minimising exposure to retaliation or escalation (Mazarr 2015; Nagl 2002).

A second defining feature is the extensive use of non-military tools to shape behaviour and perceptions. Grey-zone competition frequently relies on disinformation campaigns, election interference, economic coercion, legal manoeuvring, and other indirect instruments that influence outcomes without overtly violating international norms or triggering armed responses. The weaponisation of information, particularly through social media and digital platforms, enables rapid dissemination of tailored narratives that manipulate domestic and international audiences, erode trust, and fragment societal cohesion (Hoffman 2007).

Grey-zone strategies are also distinguished by their persistence and emphasis on incremental influence rather than decisive victory. Rather than seeking rapid or climactic outcomes, states pursue small, cumulative gains, whether territorial, political, or informational, over extended periods. Through sustained engagement, these incremental advances are consolidated into durable strategic advantages, requiring patience, adaptability, and long-term commitment rather than short-term battlefield success (Mazarr 2015).

Closely related to this persistence is the deliberate avoidance of escalation. Grey-zone operations are carefully calibrated to remain below the threshold of open armed conflict, employing restraint, calculated provocations, and adaptive tactics to achieve objectives while managing escalation risks. This calibration allows states to maintain pressure and momentum without triggering decisive military responses from adversaries or coalitions, preserving strategic flexibility and initiative (Johnson 2016).

Another defining characteristic is the engagement of both state and non-state actors within a single campaign framework. Grey-zone operations frequently involve a mix of regular forces, militias, private contractors, cyber specialists, and activist networks. The use of proxies enhances operational flexibility, provides local knowledge and logistical support, and reduces the initiating state's direct exposure to political or military retaliation, further reinforcing plausible deniability and strategic depth (Nagl 2002).

Effective grey-zone competition is typically organised as an integrated multidomain campaign. Military, diplomatic, economic, informational, cyber, and legal instruments are synchronised to generate coherent strategic effects that exceed the impact of any single tool. Coordination with allies and partners can further amplify influence while preserving ambiguity. Russia's hybrid operations in Ukraine illustrate this approach, combining cyberattacks, information warfare, economic pressure, and selective conventional military actions to achieve multidomain effects below the threshold of declared war (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 1997; Giles 2016a).

Grey-zone competition also poses significant legal and normative challenges. By exploiting gaps in international law and operating within ambiguous governance spaces, states can pursue incremental gains, such as territorial expansion, political influence, or normative revision, without provoking formal military responses. This ambiguity complicates countermeasures for states constrained by legal, ethical, or procedural frameworks, creating asymmetric advantages for actors willing to operate at the margins of established norms (Johnson 2016).

Ultimately, the strategic objective of grey-zone competition is to reshape regional or global dynamics in the initiating actor's favour. Through sustained, ambiguous, and multidimensional pressure, states seek to expand spheres of influence, undermine adversaries' cohesion, and challenge elements of the existing international order without resorting to direct warfare. In this sense, grey-zone competition represents not a lesser form of conflict, but a distinct and increasingly central mode of strategic interaction in contemporary international politics (Mazarr 2015).

Operational Principles

Effective competition below the threshold of armed conflict depends on interrelated operational principles that enable states to shape the strategic environment while managing escalation risk. Central to these principles is a deep understanding of the adversary. Insight into adversary perceptions, decision-making processes, strategic culture, and risk tolerance allows states to tailor actions that exploit vulnerabilities, influence behaviour, and avoid miscalculation or unintended escalation (Nye 2011).

Given the fluid and dynamic nature of grey-zone environments, successful competition also requires flexible and adaptive execution. States must continuously innovate and adjust tactics, techniques, and operational approaches in response to adversary adaptation, technological change, and shifting political conditions. Rigid or doctrinally fixed approaches risk rapid obsolescence in an environment characterised by ambiguity and contestation.

Closely related to adaptability is the need to continuously assess adversary capabilities and intentions. Persistent monitoring of military posture, political signalling, and informational activity ensures that operations remain aligned with strategic objectives and calibrated to evolving conditions. Such assessment allows states to adjust pressure, manage escalation thresholds, and exploit emerging opportunities while mitigating unintended consequences (Libicki 2007).

Finally, effective grey-zone competition leverages latent military presence as a source of persistent influence. Rotational deployments, low-profile training missions, and forward-positioned forces shape adversary behaviour by signalling readiness and commitment without crossing thresholds associated with overt escalation. This latent presence constrains adversary options, reassures partners, and provides rapid transition pathways should competition intensify (Johnson 2016).

Together, these principles integrate military operations with diplomatic, economic, and informational measures, ensuring that individual actions contribute coherently to the broader objective of shaping the strategic environment below the threshold of armed conflict.

Grey-zone competition is a persistent, adaptive form of strategic interaction that extends state influence without resorting to direct warfare (Mazarr 2015; Hoffman 2007). By operating below the threshold of armed conflict, states can gradually reshape regional or global balances, manage escalation risks, and exploit ambiguity to their advantage.

The success of such competition depends on integrating military and non-military instruments, coordinating with allies and partners, maintaining persistent readiness, and aligning actions with long-term strategic objectives. States that excel in the grey zone achieve cumulative influence, shape adversary behaviour, and maintain flexibility for escalation or de-escalation as conditions evolve.

In the contemporary strategic environment, where conflicts are increasingly multidomain and continuous, operating effectively below the threshold of armed conflict is essential. Mastery of grey-zone competition ensures states can preserve political and military advantages, deter adversaries, and advance strategic objectives over the long term without triggering costly and unpredictable conventional wars (Mazarr 2015; Hoffman 2007; Johnson 2016).

4.4. Armed Conflict and War

Strategic interaction unfolds along a continuous spectrum, moving from cooperation to competition below the threshold of armed conflict, and, when necessary, to armed conflict itself. Armed conflict both culminates and transforms prior competitive dynamics, emerging when sub-threshold methods fail to achieve political objectives. In this stage, lethal force becomes the primary instrument for compelling changes in adversary behaviour, shaping outcomes directly and indirectly across military, informational, economic, and political domains (Gray 1999).

While competition below the armed conflict relies on ambiguity, incremental influence, and non-lethal tools, armed conflict introduces the decisive application of force. It encompasses a

spectrum ranging from irregular warfare, guerrilla, insurgent or asymmetric operations to large-scale conventional conflict, often integrating hybrid approaches, cyber operations, and information campaigns as part of a broader strategic design. Understanding armed conflict in this continuum is critical: it is not an isolated event, but a continuation of long-term strategic rivalry, informed by prior cooperation, persistent sub-threshold competition, and preparatory measures.

Scope and Dynamics

Armed conflict is both an operational and a political phenomenon, shaped by interactions among military, informational, and strategic dynamics. At the operational level, combat operations aim to seize the initiative, degrade adversary capabilities, and gain control of critical terrain, infrastructure, lines of communication, and key operational nodes. These objectives reflect the immediate military requirements of combat and are essential for shaping the tactical and operational balance of power during conflict.

At the same time, armed conflict is inherently political. As an instrument of policy, war is initiated, escalated, and terminated according to political judgment rather than battlefield outcomes alone. Political leadership determines the acceptable costs, risks, and objectives of military action, and military success derives its strategic meaning only insofar as it advances broader political aims. Operational achievements that do not align with political purpose risk strategic failure, regardless of tactical effectiveness (Gray 1999).

Armed conflict also emerges from specific entry points within the broader continuum of strategic interaction. It often arises from pre-crisis conditions, escalating confrontations, or environments dominated by sustained grey-zone competition, where prior influence, forward positioning, intelligence preparation, and alliance dynamics shape the initial balance and trajectory of hostilities. These antecedent conditions often confer asymmetric advantages on actors that have effectively prepared the strategic environment before open conflict begins.

Finally, armed conflict extends well beyond immediate kinetic outcomes. Military operations shape informational, psychological, and political dimensions by influencing adversary perceptions, morale, domestic legitimacy, and strategic decision-making. Narrative control, public opinion management, and the psychological impact of force are integral to the conduct and outcome of war, reinforcing the insight that armed conflict is a multidomain phenomenon with enduring strategic consequences (Van Creveld 1991).

Mechanisms of Military Success

Victory in armed conflict is achieved through three interrelated mechanisms: exhaustion, attrition, and destruction. These mechanisms are adaptable, complementary, and context-dependent, and their application must be informed by the adversary's characteristics, strategic objectives, and the operating environment (Clausewitz 1976; Gray 1999).

Exhaustion: Exhaustion aims to erode the adversary's will to fight through sustained, multifaceted pressure. This includes political, economic, material, and psychological measures, such as sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and information operations (Gray 1999; Van Creveld 1991). The objective is not immediate destruction but a gradual reshaping of the adversary's strategic calculus, making continued resistance untenable. Exhaustion is particularly effective in protracted conflicts or against resilient opponents.

Attrition: Attrition targets the systematic degradation of the adversary's military and operational capabilities, including personnel, weapons systems, logistics, and command structures (Clausewitz 1976; Van Creveld 1991). By steadily reducing combat effectiveness,

attrition shifts the balance of power over time and weakens the opponent's ability to sustain operations. This mechanism often applies against adversaries with concentrated or centralised capabilities, where losses have a disproportionate strategic impact.

Destruction: Destruction directly eliminates military forces or critical infrastructure, neutralising an adversary's ability to resist or regenerate combat power (Sun Tzu 2005; Grey 1999). While sometimes employed independently for decisive outcomes, destruction is often integrated with attrition and exhaustion to achieve comprehensive strategic effects. Its ultimate aim is to enable political objectives and shape the post-conflict environment.

Integrating the Mechanisms

Effective military operations require the coordinated application of exhaustion, attrition, and destruction, tailored to the context, adversary characteristics, and overarching political objectives. While each mechanism can function independently, strategic success hinges on combining them in a context-sensitive and coherent manner (Clausewitz 1976; Gray 1999).

In conflicts involving resilient adversaries, exhaustion may take precedence to erode political will and induce negotiation, while attrition systematically degrades military capabilities over time. When adversary forces pose immediate threats to critical objectives, destruction can take priority to eliminate key nodes of resistance and enable decisive operational effects.

Integration across mechanisms maximises pressure on adversaries, leverages joint and multidomain capabilities, and ensures operations align with broader political goals. This approach requires continuous reassessment of the operating environment, including enemy capabilities, intentions, and morale, allowing military leaders to dynamically adjust the balance and application of each mechanism (Gray 1999).

By harmonising exhaustion, attrition, and destruction, commanders create a multifaceted strategy that applies sustained pressure across multiple domains, exploits adversary vulnerabilities, and minimises risks to their own forces. This integration ensures that tactical actions contribute directly to long-term strategic outcomes. As Clausewitz (1976) emphasised, "the end of the war is not the end of the military campaign," underscoring that the coordinated use of these mechanisms should always aim to shape the strategic environment and secure enduring political advantage.

Armed conflict must be understood as operating within a broader continuum of strategic interaction, not as an isolated or self-contained event. Military action achieves lasting strategic value only when it is integrated with other instruments of national power. Diplomatic engagement, economic measures, informational activity, and legal frameworks must complement battlefield operations to ensure that military success translates into sustainable political advantage rather than transient tactical gain (Gray 1999; Nye 2011).

Exploiting pre-conflict conditions plays a critical role in shaping the conduct and outcome of armed conflict. Preparedness measures such as forward military presence, joint exercises, intelligence shaping, and alliance coordination provide leverage before hostilities begin, influencing adversary risk perceptions and narrowing strategic options. States that effectively prepare the strategic environment before conflict often enter war with asymmetric advantages that shape escalation dynamics and operational trajectories.

Equally important is post-conflict consolidation. Achieving enduring strategic impact requires more than battlefield success; it depends on governance reconstruction, stabilisation efforts, managing residual threats, and mitigating political, social, and economic grievances that could

reignite conflict. Without such consolidation, even decisive military victories risk strategic reversal or prolonged instability (Gray 1999).

Translating strategic intent into battlefield success further depends on coherent operational execution. Synchronisation and coordination across domains are essential, as land, maritime, air, cyber, space, and informational components must operate in an integrated manner within joint and combined frameworks. Fragmented or poorly coordinated operations undermine effectiveness and increase the risk of strategic failure.

Finally, success in armed conflict must be measured against political outcomes rather than the destruction of enemy forces alone. Victory is defined by achieving political objectives and creating favourable strategic conditions that persist beyond the cessation of hostilities. In this sense, armed conflict represents both the culmination and the transformation of competition, blending conventional, irregular, and grey-zone methods to achieve enduring political effects rather than isolated military outcomes.

Strategic interaction unfolds along a continuous spectrum of cooperation, competition below the armed conflict, and armed conflict itself. These modes are not discrete stages but interconnected, overlapping conditions that influence and shape one another. States pursue their interests through collaboration, sub-threshold competition, and, when necessary, armed conflict, with insights and outcomes from each mode informing subsequent actions (Gray 1999; Johnson 2016; Schelling 1966).

Cooperation forms the foundational layer of this continuum, building trust, shared capacity, collective resilience, and legitimacy. It enables states and alliances to coordinate action, manage uncertainty, and create favourable conditions for influence and deterrence. Even in cooperative contexts, competition persists, among allies or adversaries, requiring constant balancing between collaboration and rivalry.

Competition below the armed conflict, or grey-zone competition, represents the predominant mode in modern security environments. States leverage ambiguity, indirect influence, and non-lethal tools, such as diplomatic, economic, informational, and military tools, to shape adversary behaviour without triggering open conflict. This persistent, adaptive struggle demands patience, flexibility, and strategic creativity, applying deterrence, signalling, and influence on incrementally secure advantage. Success in this domain is measured less by immediate victories and more by positions gained, influence extended, and the management of escalation risks (Gray 1999; Mazarr 2015; Schelling 1966).

Armed conflict, though less frequent, remains the decisive instrument of statecraft. When other tools fail, or vital interests are threatened, states apply lethal force to compel changes in adversary behaviour, achieve rapid operational effects, and secure enduring political outcomes. Armed conflict integrates MDOs, combining exhaustion, attrition, and destruction to shape the adversary's capabilities, will, and strategic environment. However, even war occurs within the broader continuum: it is informed by prior cooperative and grey-zone activities and, upon its conclusion, transitions back into competition and stabilisation efforts (Clausewitz 1976; Gray 1999).

The success of modern statecraft depends on managing the interplay between cooperation, sub-threshold competition, and armed conflict. States must synchronise diplomatic, informational, economic, and military instruments to maintain strategic flexibility, control escalation, and exploit opportunities across the continuum. As Schelling (1966) observed, the threat of force often shapes outcomes as effectively as its use, underscoring the importance of preparedness, credibility, and alignment across all instruments of national power.

Ultimately, the competition continuum requires adaptive strategies that integrate all elements of national power. States achieve strategic advantage by navigating this spectrum fluidly, leveraging cooperation, mastering grey-zone competition, and employing armed conflict, when necessary, to secure enduring political outcomes and shape the international system in their favour.

In the contemporary international system, the competition continuum is most visible in the strategic interactions among major powers whose military, economic, and technological capabilities shape regional and global security environments. The following section consequently examines the contemporary context of great-power competition and its implications for the military instrument of national power.

4.5. The Contemporary Context of Great-Power Competition

The early twenty-first century has marked the return of great-power rivalry, most prominently among the United States, China, and Russia. This resurgence has ended the brief post-Cold War period of largely uncontested U.S. primacy and inaugurated a renewed era of strategic competition. Unlike earlier rivalries, which centred primarily on land, maritime, and air domains, contemporary competition unfolds across a far broader and more interconnected set of environments. Cyberspace, outer space, the EMS, information networks, and global supply chains are no longer merely auxiliary to conventional military operations; they have become integral components of the operational and strategic battlespace. The result is a competition that is more complex, distributed, and dynamic than in previous eras, with influence generated across multiple, mutually reinforcing domains rather than through discrete theatres of conflict (Allison 2017; Mazarr 2015).

Unlike the bipolar Cold War, structured primarily around nuclear deterrence and ideological confrontation, today's strategic environment is defined by persistent competition below the threshold of full-scale war. Driven by rapid technological diffusion and by regional efforts, particularly by China and Russia, to contest U.S. influence, contemporary rivalry blends military, economic, informational, and political instruments in a continuous process of interaction. Military power in this context is no longer reserved primarily for nuclear-level deterrence or episodic high-intensity combat. Instead, it functions persistently across domains, signalling resolve, shaping adversary behaviour, contesting narratives and information spaces, and managing escalation under conditions of ambiguity and constraint (Brands and Edelman 2020b).

The revitalisation of great-power competition has consequently spurred substantial investments in military modernisation, precision-strike capabilities, and multidomain integration (Krepinevich 2015). At the same time, deepening global interdependence constrains the overt use of force. Dense economic ties, globally integrated supply chains, and complex alliance commitments raise escalation costs and require military signalling to be carefully calibrated to avoid unintended or systemic consequences. Effective strategy under these conditions therefore depends not on military capability alone, but on integrating military power with political, economic, and informational instruments to achieve influence while preserving strategic stability (Colby and Mitchell 2020).

For policymakers and military planners, this environment generates several operational imperatives. Forward presence, high-readiness forces, and routine multinational exercises remain central to demonstrating credibility and reassuring allies. At the same time, integrating precision-strike systems with cyber and space capabilities expands options short of full-scale conflict, enabling states to impose costs, secure positional advantage, and influence adversary

decision-making without direct or sustained military engagement (Kania 2019). These capabilities extend military influence across multiple domains simultaneously, increasing both the flexibility and the complexity of modern strategic competition (Allison 2017).

4.6. From Physical Battlespace to Cognitive–Informational Competition

In the twenty-first century, strategic competition extends well beyond the traditional domains of land, sea, and air. Power is increasingly generated, contested, and converted into strategic advantage across cyberspace, outer space, the EMS, and the informational domain. These environments now shape outcomes across the entire continuum of competition, from routine peacetime signalling and influence operations to high-intensity armed conflict. Rather than serving as auxiliary arenas, they have become central to how military and political power is exercised, integrated, and perceived, fundamentally transforming the character of contemporary competition (Kania 2019).

Space has emerged as a foundational domain underpinning modern military effectiveness. Space-based systems enable global navigation, precision targeting, missile warning, secure communications, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Disruption or degradation of these assets can severely impair command-and-control, situational awareness, and operational coherence across all other domains, creating acute strategic vulnerabilities (Dolman 2002). At the same time, space infrastructure supports critical civilian functions, including communications, financial transactions, and global commerce, making space security inseparable from national economic resilience and military effectiveness. As a result, competition in space increasingly carries both military and systemic economic implications, reinforcing its centrality to contemporary strategy (Kania 2019).

Cyberspace further extends strategic competition by enabling continuous influence below the threshold of armed conflict. Through cyber operations, states can compromise military command networks, disrupt critical infrastructure, manipulate data integrity, and conduct strategic intelligence collection without physical presence or clear attribution. Cyber competition is therefore persistent and ambiguous, blurring traditional distinctions between peace and war. In this domain, advantage derives not solely from offensive capabilities but equally from resilience, redundancy, and the capacity to absorb, contain, and recover from disruption. Because civilian digital infrastructure is deeply intertwined with military systems, effective cyber defence requires integration across public and private sectors, linking national resilience directly to deterrence and strategic stability (Biddle and Oelrich 2016).

Control of the EMS has likewise become a core operational requirement. Modern military forces depend on reliable EMS access for communications, sensing, navigation, targeting, and electronic warfare. Denial or degradation of EMS access can paralyse operations by severing communication links, degrading sensor performance, and undermining coordination across joint and combined (multinational) forces. As military systems become increasingly networked and data-dependent, the EMS contestation has shifted from a supporting function to a decisive operational domain in its own right. Dominance in the EMS enables decision superiority, while vulnerability in this domain can rapidly cascade into broader operational failure (Allison 2017; Biddle and Oelrich 2016).

Beyond physical and technical domains, contemporary competition increasingly targets the cognitive and informational dimension. States seek to shape how societies, political leaders, and military decisionmakers perceive reality, assess risk, and interpret intent. Information operations manipulate narratives, exploit social and political divisions, and undermine trust in institutions, often without any overt use of force. Such efforts can weaken deterrence, erode

alliance cohesion, and disrupt decision-making processes, producing strategic effects disproportionate to their material footprint. In the digital age, perception management has become a central mechanism of competition, capable of amplifying or neutralising military power by shaping expectations, legitimacy, and resolve (Colby and Mitchell 2020).

Effective military power under these conditions accordingly depends on integrated, networked, and adaptive MDOs. Cyber and space effects increasingly enable kinetic action; information campaigns reinforce deterrent signalling and legitimacy; and electronic warfare creates windows of opportunity for manoeuvre and precision strike. The objective is no longer dominance in any single domain, but cumulative advantage generated through coordinated and mutually reinforcing actions across interconnected environments. Success rests on the ability to synchronise effects, protect critical systems, manage information flows, and shape adversary perceptions amid persistent competition and uncertainty (Kallberg and Cook 2017; Kania 2019).

These developments carry significant strategic implications. Military effectiveness can no longer be measured primarily by platform counts, force size, or territorial control. Instead, strategic advantage derives from multidomain integration and the capacity to synchronise physical, informational, and cognitive instruments to shape the strategic environment over time. Military power now functions as a persistent, integrated instrument of statecraft, influencing outcomes before conflict emerges, during crises or confrontations, and after active hostilities subside. In this environment, success depends less on decisive battlefield victories alone and more on sustained influence, adaptability, and the disciplined management of competition across domains (Brands and Edelman 2020b).

4.7. Economic Interdependence and Political Risk

Deepening global economic interdependence has fundamentally reshaped the strategic calculus around using military force. In an interconnected global economy, the costs of large-scale conflict extend far beyond immediate military losses, including cascading economic disruptions that affect financial markets, supply chains, energy flows, and political stability across multiple regions simultaneously (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016a). War between major powers no longer threatens only the belligerents themselves; it carries systemic risks for allies, partners, and neutral states alike, amplifying political instability and undermining global prosperity well beyond the immediate theatre of operations.

This reality has altered how military power is employed in contemporary strategy. Rather than serving primarily as an instrument for decisive battlefield victory or territorial conquest, military force is increasingly used as a tool of politically calibrated signalling. The central objective is not necessarily to defeat an adversary outright, but to shape behaviour, reassure allies, and preserve strategic stability while avoiding escalation that could jeopardise vital economic and political interests. As a result, military operations are often designed to be limited, reversible, and communicative, emphasising control over escalation and perception as much as the application of force itself.

Several recurring patterns illustrate this evolution in hard-power use. Forward military presence in strategically significant regions has become a primary way to signal commitment and resolve. Persistent deployments reduce uncertainty about response times and political will, reassuring allies while deterring opportunistic aggression by shaping adversary planning assumptions. Freedom-of-navigation operations similarly serve both legal and strategic purposes. By asserting rights under international law in contested maritime and airspace environments, these

operations reinforce norms governing the global commons while signalling the capability and willingness to protect critical economic arteries from coercion.

Selective shows of force, including exercises, patrols, and temporary force surges, further exemplify the calibrated use of military power. Their scale, duration, and messaging are deliberately tailored to influence adversary risk calculations without provoking misinterpretation or unintended escalation. Limited interventions, such as precision strikes, peacekeeping missions, or humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, likewise demonstrate capacity and resolve while constraining objectives and scope. These actions aim to generate political and strategic effects, reinforce credibility and legitimacy, and minimise the risk of broader conflict escalation.

Taken together, these practices reflect a significant evolution in the function of military power. Armed force is no longer employed solely to impose outcomes through overwhelming violence; it increasingly serves as a mechanism for managing strategic risk within an interdependent international system. By signalling resolve, capability, and restraint simultaneously, military power helps deter aggression, reassure partners, and sustain the economic and political flows that underpin national power and international order (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016a). In this context, military force operates not only as a coercive instrument but also as a stabilising one. Its effectiveness depends on balancing deterrence with reassurance and demonstrating strength while exercising restraint. In an era of high political and economic stakes, the disciplined and strategically informed use of military power remains essential for sustaining order, managing competition, and preventing localised conflicts from escalating into systemic crises.

4.8. Technology Diffusion and the Democratisation of Force

The rapid diffusion of advanced military-relevant technologies, including unmanned aerial systems, precision-guided munitions, cyber tools, small satellites, artificial intelligence-enabled analytics, and encrypted digital communications, has fundamentally reshaped the distribution of coercive capability in international politics. Whereas military effectiveness was historically tied to industrial capacity, large standing forces, and expansive defence budgets, contemporary conflict increasingly rewards technological adaptation, networked integration, and cognitive advantage (Biddle and Oelrich 2016). In effect, this diffusion has democratized access to coercive capability, enabling a far wider range of actors, smaller states, proxies, and non-state groups to contest strategic outcomes that were once the exclusive domain of major powers.

One consequence of this transformation is that actors with limited material resources can impose meaningful military, political, and economic costs on stronger adversaries. Precision munitions, commercially available drones, cyber capabilities, and space-enabled sensing allow relatively small or weak actors to threaten critical infrastructure, disrupt command-and-control systems, and generate escalation risks disproportionate to their size. Hezbollah's use of guided rockets and Iran's deployment of drone swarms illustrate how technologically enabled actors can shape regional balances and complicate the strategic calculations of conventionally superior opponents.

At the same time, technological diffusion has weakened the traditional correlation between industrial mass and battlefield effectiveness. While industrial capacity remains relevant, particularly for sustainment and endurance, networked systems, precision targeting, and increasingly autonomous platforms have reduced the decisive advantage once conferred by sheer economic scale. Operational success now depends more on innovation, organisational learning, and integrating emerging technologies into coherent operational concepts. Ukraine's employment of commercial drones, distributed sensors, and AI-enabled intelligence to offset

Russian numerical superiority demonstrates how adaptive use of widely available technologies can reshape the balance of effectiveness on the battlefield.

Paradoxically, the same technological advances that enhance military capability have increased the vulnerability of advanced forces to asymmetric disruption. Highly networked and technologically sophisticated armed forces are exposed to cyber intrusions, electronic warfare, spoofing, and low-cost unmanned systems that can degrade situational awareness, disrupt logistics, and slow operational tempo. These vulnerabilities incentivise adversaries to pursue indirect and asymmetric approaches rather than direct confrontation, exploiting dependence on digital connectivity and complex systems to generate disproportionate effects.

As a result, contemporary military effectiveness increasingly hinges on resilience, data integrity, and algorithmic advantage rather than firepower or platform survivability alone. In an information-centric battlespace, secure data flows, robust networks, trusted software, and effective human-machine integration become central determinants of combat effectiveness. AI-enabled decision support and autonomous systems offer decisive advantages only when they are reliable, explainable, and protected against manipulation, deception, and systemic failure.

Taken together, these dynamics compel a reconceptualisation of military capability. Modern strength must be measured less by numerical force size or industrial output and more by the ability to integrate complex networks, defend critical information systems, and operate effectively amid persistent disruption. Technological diffusion erodes traditional hierarchies, narrows the margin of dominance historically enjoyed by advanced armed forces, and accelerates the tempo of strategic competition. In this democratized battlespace, operational advantage accrues to actors capable of rapid adaptation, resilient system design, and continuous learning, underscoring that flexibility, integration, and institutional agility can be as decisive as raw technological superiority.

The evolving strategic environment imposes profound demands on armed forces, reflecting the combined pressures of great-power competition, grey-zone conflict, and MDOs. Modern armed forces must not only fight wars but also continuously shape the operational and political environment, projecting influence while managing escalation risk and strategic uncertainty (Colby and Mitchell 2020). Military effectiveness is thus no longer defined solely by battlefield performance, but by the ability to integrate force with broader statecraft, operate across domains, and sustain credibility over time.

A central requirement in this environment is multidomain competence. Armed forces must be capable of operating seamlessly across land, maritime, air, cyber, space, and informational domains, integrating these capabilities with conventional operations to synchronise effects, disrupt adversary systems, and exploit systemic vulnerabilities (Allison 2017). Multidomain integration is not merely a technical challenge but a doctrinal and organisational imperative. It requires joint planning, adaptive command-and-control structures, and cross-domain situational awareness that enable forces to operate coherently amid complexity and disruption (Kania 2019). Large-scale exercises such as NATO's Trident Juncture and U.S. Indo-Pacific multidomain drills demonstrate how synchronisation across domains generates both operational advantage and deterrent credibility by signalling readiness, cohesion, and the ability to translate capability into action.

Credibility in this context depends as much on readiness and political coherence as on material capability. Military strength is measured not only by platforms or inventories, but by the perceived reliability of doctrine, leadership, sustainment, and decision-making under stress. Readiness, including personnel quality, training, logistics, and operations planning, underpins

deterrence and strategic signalling by demonstrating that forces can act decisively within relevant timeframes (Biddle and Oelrich 2016). Political coherence is equally important: armed forces must operate in visible alignment with national strategy, ensuring consistency between posture, objectives, and international messaging (Brands 2021). Forward-deployed U.S. forces in Europe illustrate this dynamic by simultaneously reassuring NATO allies and signalling resolve to potential adversaries. Where such alignment is absent, even technologically advanced forces risk losing strategic influence and deterrent effect.

Escalation management has likewise become an institutional necessity rather than an episodic concern. Contemporary competition unfolds rapidly, ambiguously, and across multiple domains, increasing the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation (Colby and Mitchell 2020). Armed forces must therefore institutionalise mechanisms to control escalation while preserving initiative. Crisis communication channels, deconfliction arrangements, and signalling protocols play a critical role in managing risk in high-stakes environments. U.S.–China military communication mechanisms and NATO–Russia Black Sea deconfliction arrangements show how formalised tools can mitigate danger even amid intense rivalry. In this environment, military forces operate not only tactically but psychologically, shaping adversary perceptions of both restraint and capability at the same time (Mazarr 2015).

At the strategic level, military effectiveness increasingly depends on whole-of-government coordination. Armed forces no longer operate in isolation; their impact is amplified when synchronised with diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of national power (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016b). Coordinated planning ensures that kinetic actions reinforce political objectives, strengthen alliances, and shape adversary calculations across multiple dimensions. Cyber operations, for example, may complement economic sanctions, while humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions enhance legitimacy and alliance cohesion. Military power thus functions most effectively when embedded within an integrated national strategy that connects force application to broader political and normative goals (Mazarr 2015).

Taken together, these imperatives underscore that military power is simultaneously physical and psychological, kinetic and symbolic. Its influence derives not only from the capacity for organised violence but from the credibility of posture, integration with broader instruments of statecraft, and the ability to shape perceptions across multiple audiences (Brands and Edelman 2020a). In practice, effectiveness depends on clarity of intent, multidomain competence, resilient and secure technological systems, and disciplined management of escalation risks. Misperception, overreach, or poorly coordinated action can undermine deterrence and stability, while strategically informed and institutionally coherent operations can shape outcomes, manage risk, and sustain both national and allied objectives.

Technological adaptation further reinforces these demands. Emerging capabilities, including AI, autonomous systems, resilient C4ISR networks, and hypersonic weapons, are central to future warfighting, but their diffusion requires continuous experimentation, integration, and training to maintain a qualitative advantage (Allison 2017). Technological superiority alone is insufficient; it must be embedded within doctrine, operational concepts, and effective human–machine integration to generate decisive effects (Biddle and Oelrich 2016). Initiatives such as the U.S. Army’s Project Convergence demonstrate how testing AI-enabled sensor-to-shooter integration can improve decision speed, resilience, and adaptability under contested conditions.

Looking forward, as great-power competition, grey-zone operations, and technological diffusion accelerate, armed forces must prioritise adaptability, innovation, and integration across institutional, operational, and political levels. Armed forces that are best able to operate across domains, manage escalation, and align operations with political objectives will retain

strategic advantage (Colby and Mitchell 2020). In this context, military power is not merely an instrument of force but a persistent, adaptive, and integrated enabler of national strategy, shaping the environment before conflict emerges and sustaining influence across the full spectrum of strategic competition.

4.9. Enduring Themes of the New Competitive Era

The revival of great-power competition and the expansion of multidomain contestation reveal several enduring themes that define the contemporary strategic environment and reshape the logic of military power (Mazarr 2015). These themes do not represent a rupture with historical patterns of competition, but rather an intensification and recombination of long-standing dynamics amid technological acceleration, globalisation, and persistent rivalry.

First, military advantage is increasingly shaped by the interdependence of political, societal, and technological factors rather than by force structure or battlefield proficiency alone. Effective military power is embedded within broader national systems encompassing governance legitimacy, societal resilience, economic sustainability, defence industrial capacity, and innovation ecosystems (Biddle and Oelrich 2016). Military effectiveness accordingly depends on civil–military cohesion, the robustness of political institutions, and the ability to mobilise and sustain technological and industrial resources over time. China’s integration of dual-use technology networks and Russia’s fusion of military, industrial, cyber, and informational capabilities illustrate how systemic integration can amplify military power beyond traditional measures of force (Galeotti 2019). In this environment, states that fail to cultivate resilience across political, economic, and technological domains risk undermining their military effectiveness regardless of their nominal capabilities.

Second, the boundary between war and peace has become increasingly blurred. Contemporary strategic competition unfolds continuously across political, informational, economic, cyber, and military domains, eroding the traditional distinction between peacetime and wartime activity. States routinely use military capabilities to signal deterrence, coercion, and reassurance without crossing thresholds associated with conventional conflict. Russian hybrid operations in Ukraine, China’s maritime militia activities in the South China Sea, and persistent U.S. freedom-of-navigation patrols exemplify how military power is exercised as a persistent instrument of influence rather than solely as a tool of decisive combat. As a result, armed forces must operate across the full spectrum of competition, ranging from routine presence and influence operations to crisis response and high-intensity warfare, while maintaining escalation control, legitimacy, and political coherence.

Third, resilience and redundancy have become central determinants of military credibility and operational continuity. As military and civilian systems grow more interconnected and technologically dependent, systemic vulnerabilities multiply. Adversaries increasingly exploit these vulnerabilities through cyber operations, electronic warfare, attacks on logistics and infrastructure, and interference with space-based assets. The war in Ukraine since 2022 has underscored the decisive importance of resilient communications, redundant logistics, adaptive command structures, and the capacity to absorb and recover from sustained disruption. Resilience is no longer a supporting function; it is a core component of deterrence, credibility, and sustained combat effectiveness. Forces unable to operate under degraded conditions risk losing initiative and strategic leverage quickly.

Fourth, the accelerated diffusion of disruptive technologies has fundamentally altered the distribution of coercive capability. Precision-strike systems, unmanned platforms, cyber tools, AI, and commercially accessible space assets have democratized access to military-relevant

power, enabling smaller states, proxy forces, and non-state actors to impose strategic costs on more powerful adversaries (Mazarr 2015). The widespread use of drones in asymmetric conflicts, AI-enabled intelligence exploitation, and commercial satellite imagery for targeting demonstrates how technological diffusion compresses the gap between advanced and less advanced actors (Kania 2019). Military power must therefore be evaluated not only in terms of platform acquisition, but also in terms of adaptability, integration, resilience against technological surprise, and institutional learning.

Together, these enduring themes demonstrate that military power in the contemporary era no longer operates in isolation. Its effectiveness depends on integrating political authority, societal resilience, and technological capacity; competing persistently across domains; resisting continuous disruption; and adapting to rapidly diffusing innovation. Translating these insights into strategic advantage requires deliberate institutional and policy choices that embed military capability within a broader framework of national power.

Conclusion

To operationalise these themes and maintain strategic advantage in a competitive environment, armed forces and policymakers must integrate political, societal, and technological considerations directly into force design, doctrine, and strategic planning (Biddle and Oelrich 2016). Military postures should be persistent and cross-domain, calibrated to balance signalling, deterrence, reassurance, and escalation control rather than optimised solely for decisive combat (Brands and Edelman 2020b). Sustained investment in resilient and redundant logistics, networks, and C4ISR systems is essential to ensure operational continuity under attack and preserve credibility in prolonged competition (Kania 2019). At the same time, states must prioritise continuous innovation, experimentation, and the rapid incorporation of disruptive technologies to prevent strategic surprise and erosion of advantage (Allison 2017). Finally, states must strengthen whole-of-government coordination to synchronise military action with diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments, ensuring that force application supports a coherent national strategy rather than operating as an isolated tool (Nye 2011; Brooks and Wohlforth 2016b).

Throughout history, military power has remained central to state survival, influence, and maintaining international order. In the contemporary era, however, military effectiveness can no longer be defined solely by mass, firepower, or industrial output. Instead, it reflects a multidimensional combination of technological innovation, alliance cohesion, information dominance, societal resilience, strategic culture, and political legitimacy.

In the twenty-first century, states must sustain a continuous competitive posture that integrates deterrence, crisis management, cyber and informational defence, forward presence, alliance coordination, and technological adaptation (Colby and Mitchell 2020). Military power remains indispensable, but its strategic value lies in its integration with political, economic, social, and informational instruments of national strategy. When properly aligned, military capability generates influence even without open conflict, shaping behaviour, managing risk, and sustaining strategic advantage (Brands 2021).

The pathway to security and influence has become more complex, contested, and multidimensional. Yet the core principle endures: states survive and thrive by translating military potential into coherent, integrated, and adaptable strategic advantage across the full spectrum of competition.

5. STRATEGIC USE OF MILITARY POWER

Military power derives its strategic significance not from the mere possession of armed forces but from their purposeful employment in support of political objectives. Modern military forces serve a broad range of purposes that extend well beyond traditional warfighting. The use of force spans the entire competition continuum, from cooperation and competition short of armed conflict to crisis and open warfare. In its various forms, it shapes the international environment and helps states pursue and protect their national interests.

As Carl von Clausewitz argued in *On War* (1776), military force is a rational instrument of policy, to be employed in accordance with clearly defined political purposes rather than as an end. He identified three principal objects of military action:

- destruction of an adversary's armed forces;
- seizure or neutralisation of resources that sustain resistance;
- shaping of public opinion and political will.

A literature review of the principal works of classic and modern strategic theorists shows that the strategic use of force has never been limited to the simple physical destruction of an adversary. Across different theoretical perspectives, military force is understood as an instrument for achieving political objectives, protecting interests, influencing an opponent's behaviour, shaping the strategic environment, and, when necessary, defeating an adversary in combat.

Theorists of war provide a conceptual foundation for understanding military force as an instrument of political purpose rather than merely an instrument of combat. War is defined as an act of violence intended to compel an opponent to fulfil one's will, establishing a fundamental distinction between the political purpose of force and its physical employment. Military force may serve either to protect the existing political and territorial position or to alter it through offensive action. Clausewitz (1776) and Sun Tzu (1663) offer a complementary perspective by emphasising achieving strategic objectives without necessarily resorting to direct combat. The possibility of achieving strategic effects without direct armed confrontation demonstrates that political objectives should be distinguished from military objectives. Military force may therefore serve broader political purposes beyond defeating an adversary in combat, particularly by influencing behaviour and shaping the strategic environment. This perspective is particularly relevant to using military force for strategic influence and posturing (Liddell Hart 1967). In addition, the paradoxical and non-linear relationship between military action and strategic outcomes further highlights that the effects of military force may differ from, or even contradict, its immediate military results (Luttwak 1987).

For analytical purposes, strategic use of military power is structured into six categories: defence, deterrence, compellence, offence, posturing, and miscellaneous (Jordan 2016). These categories show that analysing military power should extend beyond its physical use to consider its political purpose, intended effects, and broader strategic consequences. This theoretical foundation therefore provides the basis for examining defence, deterrence, compellence, offence, posturing, and miscellaneous uses of force as six distinct but complementary mechanisms for achieving strategic objectives.

This chapter develops an integrated framework for understanding strategic use of military power as an instrument of national policy. It examines the principal theoretical concepts through which military power is employed to achieve political objectives across the spectrum of

cooperation, competition, crisis, and armed conflict. Collectively, they demonstrate that military power extends beyond the conduct of war, serving as a multidimensional instrument of statecraft that protects national interests, shapes strategic behaviour, manages crises, and supports broader political and diplomatic objectives. By linking military capabilities to political ends through distinct yet complementary mechanisms, the framework highlights the strategic versatility of military force in both peace and war.

The strategic use of military power represents a continuum of activities through which states pursue political and strategic objectives. Military power is not an autonomous instrument; rather, it must be understood in relation to the political purposes it is intended to serve. Its employment may range from the direct application of combat power against an adversary to using military capabilities to influence behaviour, prevent conflict, reassure partners, or shape the strategic environment. The distinction between political purpose and operational employment is therefore essential to understanding how military force is applied under different circumstances.

These distinctions can be consolidated into six categories of the use of military power. Defence and offence represent the principal direct applications of military power: protecting against aggression and employing force to impose costs or achieve specific military objectives. Deterrence and compellence represent indirect or coercive applications of military power, differentiated by whether the objective is to prevent a particular action or to induce a change in behaviour. Posturing encompasses the employment and positioning of military capabilities to communicate resolve, demonstrate capability, shape perceptions, reassure partners, and influence the strategic environment without necessarily engaging in combat. Finally, the miscellaneous category accommodates activities that do not fit neatly within the preceding categories, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, peacekeeping, nation assistance, and other forms of military employment identified within the broader spectrum of military operations.

5.1. Defence

Defence represents the most fundamental category of the use of military power. Defending the state or community is the primary function of military force. It encompasses protecting national territory, sovereignty, population, critical infrastructure, and allied interests against external aggression. Traditionally associated with preserving the status quo, defence seeks to deny an adversary the ability to achieve its political or military objectives through the effective use of military capabilities.

Carl von Clausewitz (1976) viewed defence not merely as a passive posture but as the stronger form of warfare, arguing that it derives its strength from favourable terrain, prepared positions, shorter lines of communication, and political legitimacy. In *On War*, he maintained that defensive operations are strategically advantageous because they exploit inherent asymmetries that increase the costs imposed upon an aggressor while preserving the defender's freedom of action. However, Clausewitz also emphasised that defence cannot achieve decisive political outcomes on its own; successful defence ultimately requires a transition to offensive action capable of imposing the defender's political will.

Basil Liddell Hart (1967) expanded this understanding by advocating the indirect approach. Rather than relying solely on physical resistance, he argued that effective defence seeks to undermine an opponent's operational cohesion and strategic balance through manoeuvre, deception, and psychological dislocation. His emphasis on avoiding costly frontal engagements

remains highly relevant in contemporary operations characterised by precision strike systems, autonomous platforms, and long-range fires.

Modern defence integrates land, maritime, air, cyber, and space capabilities into a coherent operational framework that can counter simultaneous threats across interconnected domains. Consequently, defence has evolved from protecting territory to preserving decision superiority and operational resilience in a contested strategic environment.

Territorial defence remains the core mission of armed forces and the most visible manifestation of state sovereignty. Its primary purpose is to prevent adversaries from gaining control over national territory, airspace, maritime approaches, critical infrastructure, or population centres. In the contemporary security environment, however, territorial defence must address a much broader range of threats than conventional invasion. States increasingly face hybrid operations, limited incursions, coercive demonstrations, sabotage activities, and grey-zone actions designed to challenge sovereignty while avoiding open conflict.

Effective territorial defence rests upon three interrelated principles: detection, reaction, and depth. Early detection reduces strategic surprise by giving political and military leaders more decision space. Rapid reaction capabilities enable timely responses to emerging threats before they escalate into irreversible territorial losses. Strategic depth ensures that even when localised penetration occurs, the adversary cannot convert tactical gains into lasting operational or political control.

Standing military forces constitute the foundation of territorial defence. Permanent land, air, and naval formations provide continuous presence, immediate responsiveness, and a visible deterrent effect. Their existence complicates adversary planning by denying uncontested access and raising the risks of aggression. NATO's forward presence along its eastern flank illustrates how standing forces serve both defensive and signalling functions by reducing the feasibility of achieving rapid strategic gains through surprise or limited aggression.

Rapid reaction forces complement standing formations by providing mobility, readiness, and operational flexibility. Their value lies not simply in numerical strength but in their ability to close the temporal gap between warning and action. Through high readiness levels, pre-planned logistics, and interoperable command arrangements, they deny adversaries opportunities to exploit hesitation or mobilisation delays. Equally important, they provide political leaders with scalable response options that reduce the likelihood of uncontrolled escalation.

Reserve and territorial defence forces contribute strategic depth and long-term endurance. No contemporary state can sustain prolonged high-intensity conflict solely through its peacetime active force structure. Reserve formations reinforce standing units, replace losses, and expand force generation capacity during protracted crises. Ukraine's mobilisation following the Russian invasion in 2022 and Israel's long-established reserve system illustrate the importance of reserves in sustaining both deterrence credibility and operational endurance. Territorial formations further complicate adversary occupation efforts while strengthening cooperation between military structures and civil authorities.

Territorial defence therefore represents far more than border protection. It is a dynamic and integrated system that combines standing forces, rapid reinforcement mechanisms, reserve capacity, and geographically anchored territorial formations to preserve sovereignty and deny adversaries control of time, space, and strategic initiative. Modern defence extends beyond protecting territory to safeguard airspace, maritime approaches, cyber networks, and space-based systems. Territorial defence protects sovereignty and denies adversaries physical control. Integrated Air and Missile Defence shields populations, forces, and critical infrastructure from

long-range attack. Maritime security preserves economic lifelines and strategic access, while military cyber defence and space protection safeguard the informational foundations of military effectiveness. Together, these capabilities form an integrated defence architecture that preserves national sovereignty, enhances resilience, and denies adversaries the ability to achieve political objectives through coercion or aggression.

5.2. Deterrence

Deterrence is a category of strategic use of force that operates continuously along the competition continuum, from cooperative engagement and strategic signalling to crisis management and armed conflict. Its essential purpose is to prevent adversary aggression or compel restraint by shaping perceptions of risk, cost, and the likelihood of operational or strategic failure (Waltz 1979, Freedman 2004). Deterrence uses military power and other instruments of national power to prevent an adversary from undertaking an unwanted action by convincing it that the anticipated costs, risks, and consequences of such behaviour will outweigh any potential gains. Unlike defence, which responds to aggression once it occurs, deterrence seeks to shape decision-making before force is employed and is therefore fundamentally preventive. As Gray argues, deterrence has a fundamentally negative purpose, namely persuading an opponent not to undertake an action that it might otherwise choose to pursue (Gray 2003).

Thomas Schelling (1966) provided the most influential modern explanation of deterrence, emphasising that military power derives its strategic value not solely from its destructive capacity but from its ability to influence others' expectations and calculations. From this perspective, deterrence depends upon the credible communication of both capability and political resolve. Military power alone is insufficient; potential adversaries must also believe such capabilities can be employed effectively and that political leaders are willing to use them if necessary. Schelling therefore distinguished deterrence from compellence. While deterrence seeks to preserve an existing situation by discouraging unwanted behaviour, compellence seeks to change an adversary's behaviour by inducing it to take a specific action (Schelling 1966).

Although Carl von Clausewitz (1976) did not develop a formal theory of deterrence, his understanding of war as an instrument of policy provides an important conceptual foundation for deterrence theory. Clausewitz argued that military force acquires strategic significance only when subordinated to political objectives. Through this lens, deterrence succeeds when the credible prospect of military action influences an adversary's political calculations to the point that war is avoided altogether.

Contemporary NATO strategy reflects a broader, more integrated understanding of deterrence than characterised the Cold War. Deterrence today extends beyond conventional and nuclear capabilities to incorporate cyber capabilities, space assets, intelligence, strategic communications, economic resilience, societal preparedness, and political cohesion. NATO increasingly combines deterrence by punishment with deterrence by denial, emphasising not only the ability to impose unacceptable costs on an aggressor but also the ability to deny the attainment of strategic objectives through resilient defence, rapid reinforcement, and sustained operational endurance. In this context, effective deterrence increasingly depends on information superiority, credible signalling, and the capacity to generate uncertainty about the likelihood of success for potential aggression. By influencing an adversary's assessment of risks, costs, and prospects for success, deterrence seeks to preserve stability and prevent conflict before the actual employment of force becomes necessary (Schelling 1966).

Deterrence constitutes one of the central categories of the strategic use of force and a cornerstone of contemporary security and defence policy. While defence seeks to protect territory, populations, critical infrastructure, and national interests against aggression, deterrence seeks to prevent aggression in the first place. Defence reduces vulnerability by denying opportunities for successful attack; deterrence seeks to influence potential adversaries' decision-making by convincing them that aggression is unlikely to succeed or will result in unacceptable consequences. Together, defence and deterrence form the foundation of strategic stability in the contemporary security environment.

Deterrence is therefore fundamentally concerned with influencing behaviour. As Freedman (2004) observes, deterrence operates by shaping perceptions of risk, cost, and opportunity rather than through the direct application of force itself. Similarly, Waltz (1979) emphasises that deterrence functions by affecting the calculations of states and other strategic actors before military action is undertaken. Its purpose is to prevent adversaries from initiating hostile actions by convincing them that the likely consequences will outweigh any anticipated benefits. Consequently, deterrence is primarily a cognitive and psychological process that operates in decision-makers' minds rather than on the battlefield.

Unlike warfighting, which seeks to achieve objectives using force, deterrence relies on manipulating expectations. The actual strategic use of military power may indicate that deterrence has failed. Successful deterrence occurs when military capabilities, political resolve, and strategic communication persuade an adversary that initiating aggression would be futile, excessively costly, or strategically counterproductive. Thus, deterrence is an anticipatory factor of military power that operates continuously across peace, competition, crisis, and conflict.

Modern deterrence has evolved significantly beyond its Cold War foundations. Whereas deterrence was once associated primarily with nuclear weapons and preventing major war between great powers, contemporary deterrence encompasses a much broader spectrum of military and non-military activities. Nuclear forces remain central to strategic deterrence, particularly in preventing existential threats. However, deterrence now also incorporates conventional military capabilities, cyber defence, intelligence, space-based systems, strategic communications, economic resilience, critical infrastructure protection, and societal preparedness. Together, these capabilities form a multidomain deterrence posture that can influence adversary behaviour across the entire competition continuum. Contemporary deterrence depends not merely upon combat power but upon the coordinated employment of military, political, informational, cyber, space, and economic instruments to create a strategic environment in which aggression appears unlikely to achieve useful outcomes. Under this approach, deterrence becomes a continuous effort to shape adversary assessments rather than a condition activated solely during periods of crisis.

Contemporary deterrence operates through two complementary mechanisms: deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. Both seek to influence adversary decision-making, but through different strategic logics. Together, they form the conceptual basis of NATO's deterrence posture.

Deterrence by denial seeks to persuade an adversary that aggression will fail to achieve its objectives. Rather than threatening retaliation, denial aims to convince potential aggressors that they cannot attain the desired political, military, or strategic gains. If adversaries believe that they are unlikely to succeed, their incentives for aggression are significantly reduced. This approach depends heavily upon defence, resilience, readiness, and operational effectiveness. Integrated air and missile defence systems, resilient command-and-control networks, territorial defence forces, maritime security capabilities, cyber resilience measures, and protected critical

infrastructure all contribute to deterrence by denial. By demonstrating that attacks can be absorbed, resisted, and defeated, these capabilities undermine the strategic logic of coercion and aggression.

In contemporary security environments, deterrence by denial increasingly relies upon Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) architectures. These integrate long-range precision fires, air and missile defence systems, cyber capabilities, intelligence assets, electronic warfare, and space-enabled surveillance into a coherent defensive network. Such systems increase operational uncertainty for potential aggressors and complicate their ability to achieve rapid or limited gains. By denying opportunities for successful aggression, A2/AD architectures reinforce both deterrence and strategic stability.

The growing importance of resilience has further strengthened denial's role in modern deterrence. States increasingly recognise that deterrence depends not only on preventing attacks but also on reducing the strategic benefits adversaries might derive from successful attacks. Critical infrastructure protection, reserve mobilisation systems, continuity of government arrangements, cyber security, and societal resilience all help demonstrate that hostile actions are unlikely to produce decisive outcomes. Deterrence by denial therefore extends beyond traditional military capabilities and incorporates broader national resilience measures.

Deterrence by punishment seeks to prevent aggression through the threat of unacceptable retaliation. Rather than focusing primarily upon preventing success, punishment seeks to convince adversaries that any hostile action will trigger costs so severe that the benefits of aggression become irrelevant.

Historically, deterrence by punishment has been closely associated with nuclear weapons. Nuclear deterrence remains the ultimate form of punishment because it threatens consequences of such magnitude that no rational actor could regard aggression as an acceptable option. For this reason, nuclear forces continue to provide the ultimate guarantee of Allied security and remain a central component of NATO's overall deterrence posture.

However, punishment is no longer confined to the nuclear domain. Contemporary military forces possess a broad range of conventional, cyber, informational, and economic instruments capable of imposing high costs upon adversaries. Long-range precision strike systems, offensive cyber capabilities, economic sanctions, and multidomain military operations may all contribute to deterrence by punishment. These instruments provide decision-makers with scalable response options across the escalation spectrum and increase the flexibility of modern deterrence strategies.

Effective deterrence rarely depends exclusively upon either denial or punishment. Instead, modern deterrence combines both approaches in a mutually reinforcing framework. Denial reduces the probability of successful aggression, whilst punishment increases the associated costs. Together, they create uncertainty regarding both the feasibility and consequences of hostile actions, thereby strengthening deterrent effectiveness.

The effectiveness of deterrence depends upon three mutually reinforcing elements: capability, credibility, and communication. Together, these elements determine whether deterrent signals influence adversary behaviour and whether deterrence prevents conflict. Capability provides the means to deny aggression or impose unacceptable costs; credibility establishes the adversary's belief that these means will be employed if necessary; and communication ensures that both capability and intent are clearly conveyed and correctly interpreted. Deterrence is therefore not simply a function of military strength, but a relationship between available power, political will, and the adversary's perception of both.

Capability refers to a state's or alliance's demonstrable ability to generate meaningful operational effects and sustain military activity under contested conditions. It extends beyond the mere possession of military forces, equipment, or advanced technologies and encompasses the capacity to employ these resources effectively across domains (Posen 1984; Biddle 2004). In contemporary security environments, deterrent capability is consequently multidomain and layered. Nuclear forces provide existential deterrence, conventional forces offer flexible response options, cyber capabilities protect critical networks and may disrupt adversary operations, while space systems provide communications, intelligence, surveillance, and early warning. Together, they create an integrated deterrence posture that can address different forms and levels of aggression.

Readiness and sustainment are equally important dimensions of capability. Forces that exist only on paper provide limited deterrent value; military formations must be trained, deployable, sustainable, and able to operate effectively under crisis conditions. Exercises, mobilisation activities, forward deployments, and interoperability programmes show that theoretical capabilities can translate into operational effects. At the same time, modern conflict places considerable demands upon logistics systems, industrial capacity, supply chains, and personnel replacement mechanisms. A force capable of fighting effectively for only a short period offers limited deterrent value. Conversely, an adversary is less likely to challenge a state or alliance that can sustain operations, regenerate combat power, and maintain political resolve over time. As Freedman (2004) and Gray (2013) observe, deterrence ultimately rests upon confidence that military power can be relied upon during a crisis rather than merely displayed during peacetime.

Credibility provides the psychological link between capability and political intent. Capability alone is insufficient if an adversary doubts that military power will be employed when required. Schelling (1966) argued that deterrence depends less upon raw military strength than upon the adversary's belief that threatened actions will occur. Credibility therefore derives from demonstrated resolve, political consistency, visible preparedness, and a clear willingness to fulfil stated commitments. Military exercises, force-readiness measures, forward deployments, and alliance commitments provide tangible evidence of that resolve. NATO's Cold War posture remains a classic example, with forward-deployed forces, integrated command structures, and routine multinational exercises demonstrating both capability and willingness to fulfil collective defence commitments. Contemporary NATO activities along its eastern flank perform a similar function by reinforcing perceptions that Allied commitments remain credible and enduring.

Resilience, protection, and alliance cohesion further strengthen credibility. Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD), resilient command-and-control systems, protected infrastructure, and continuity measures demonstrate that military forces and political institutions can withstand coercion and attack, thereby reducing the likelihood that escalation will produce decisive strategic effects. Similarly, consistent strategic messaging, visible cooperation among allies, and integrated military structures reinforce confidence in collective resolve and the political sustainability of defence commitments.

Communication completes the deterrence relationship by ensuring the adversary understands capability and credibility. It encompasses strategic messaging, diplomatic engagement, military signalling, public declarations, readiness demonstrations, multinational exercises, and force posture adjustments. Forward deployments, air policing missions, freedom-of-navigation operations, and major military exercises communicate capability and resolve while simultaneously reassuring allies and partners (Boot 2002). Effective communication also reduces misunderstanding, clarifies intentions, and establishes thresholds. Transparency measures, confidence-building mechanisms, and arms-control verification regimes can

therefore contribute to strategic stability by reducing uncertainty and minimising opportunities for miscalculation. Communication consequently performs both a deterrent and stabilising function, linking military capability and political resolve to the adversary's perception and ultimately shaping its decision-making.

Deterrence is not solely a military undertaking. It is a comprehensive national and alliance effort involving political institutions, military organisations, intelligence services, civil authorities, and international partnerships. Effective deterrence emerges from coordinated action by these actors, not from military capability alone.

Political leadership provides strategic direction and defines national objectives, risk thresholds, and deterrence policies. Political leaders establish the legal and constitutional foundations for deterrent action and communicate national resolve to both domestic and international audiences. Their willingness to sustain commitments during periods of tension is essential to deterrent credibility (Schelling 1966; Jervis 1984b).

The armed forces provide the operational capabilities underpinning deterrence. These include nuclear forces, conventional formations, IAMD systems, cyber defence units, intelligence capabilities, maritime forces, and rapid-reaction formations. Through continuous training, exercises, and operational deployments, military forces turn political commitments into credible, tangible deterrent capabilities.

Intelligence organisations support deterrence by providing assessment, warning, and situational awareness. Accurate intelligence enables strategic decision-makers to understand adversary intentions, identify emerging threats, and calibrate deterrent responses appropriately. Contemporary intelligence activities span cyber, space, signals, human, and open-source domains, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the security environment.

Alliances and strategic partnerships significantly amplify deterrence. NATO's collective defence commitments extend security guarantees beyond individual states and increase the uncertainty facing potential aggressors. By pooling military capabilities, coordinating strategies, and integrating command structures, alliances reinforce the credibility and effectiveness of deterrence. As Art and Greenhill (2018a) note, collective defence arrangements demonstrate that aggression against one member may trigger a coordinated multinational response.

Deterrence today operates in an increasingly complex strategic environment. Traditional concepts developed during the Cold War remain relevant, but they must now address challenges posed by grey-zone activities, technological diffusion, hybrid warfare, cyber operations, disinformation, and strategic competition below the threshold of armed conflict.

Grey-zone activities are particularly challenging because they exploit ambiguity. Cyber intrusions, proxy actions, sabotage, economic coercion, and information operations often remain below thresholds traditionally associated with military response. This ambiguity complicates attribution, weakens escalation control, and creates uncertainty regarding appropriate responses (Mazarr 2015; Hoffman 2007).

Technological change introduces additional challenges. Artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, and space technologies possess significant military potential whilst often remaining embedded within civilian infrastructures. Their dual-use character complicates deterrence, increases escalation risks, and creates legal and political dilemmas regarding response options (Nye 2011; Libicki 2009; Johnson-Freese 2017). Escalation dynamics have also become faster and less predictable, particularly in cyber and space domains. Unlike conventional military operations, cyber and space interactions can unfold at machine speed,

with limited warning and ambiguous effects, challenging traditional escalation control frameworks built around gradual force employment and observable thresholds (Jervis 1976; Acton 2018). Information warfare further complicates deterrence by targeting perceptions directly. Disinformation campaigns seek to undermine credibility, weaken alliance cohesion, manipulate public opinion, and erode confidence in institutions. As Freedman (2004), Singer and Friedman (2014), and Brands (2021) observe, modern deterrence increasingly depends upon information resilience, public trust, and the ability to defend the cognitive dimension of conflict.

5.3. Compellence

Compellence is the use, or threatened use, of military power to persuade an adversary to alter its behaviour and comply with specific political demands. Unlike deterrence, which seeks to prevent an opponent from taking an undesired action, compellence aims to induce action by requiring an adversary to change course, reverse a decision, withdraw forces, cease hostile activities, abandon a policy, or accept particular political conditions. As a result, compellence is inherently proactive and often more demanding than deterrence because success depends upon achieving observable behavioural change rather than maintaining the status quo.

The theoretical foundations of compellence are most closely associated with Thomas Schelling (1966), who distinguished between deterrence and compellence as two related but fundamentally different forms of coercive strategy. Schelling argued that compellence is generally harder to achieve because it requires the target to take deliberate action, often publicly, potentially at the cost of prestige, credibility, or political legitimacy. Whereas deterrence may succeed quietly when an adversary chooses not to act, compellence requires visible compliance. To be effective, coercive pressure must therefore be sustained over time and supported by credible threats, clear political objectives, and the capacity to escalate if the target refuses to comply. The opponent must ultimately conclude that compliance represents a less costly option than continued resistance.

The intellectual roots of compellence also appear in Clausewitz's understanding of war as an instrument of policy. Although Clausewitz (1976) did not use the modern term compellence, his emphasis on influencing the enemy's will reflects the same underlying logic. For Clausewitz, military action was never an end in itself; its strategic value derived from its ability to shape political calculations and compel an adversary to accept outcomes that it would otherwise reject. Consequently, coercive military operations are designed not merely to inflict destruction or attrition but to alter an opponent's perception of costs, risks, and probabilities of success. The ultimate objective is to influence decision-making at the political and strategic levels rather than simply to achieve tactical victories on the battlefield.

Compellence forms part of the broader concept of coercion. Coercion refers to efforts to influence another actor's behaviour through threats or limited applications of force, whereas compellence is a more focused strategy aimed at securing a clearly defined action. Compliance with negotiated settlements, withdrawal from occupied territory, cessation of hostile activities, or acceptance of political conditions can all be objectives of compellent strategies. Both coercion and compellence seek to influence adversary calculations; however, compellence places greater demands upon strategic planners because the desired outcome must be visible, measurable, and politically significant.

A defining characteristic of compellence is its risk-acceptant nature. Whereas deterrence principally seeks to avoid escalation and preserve stability, compellence deliberately operates closer to escalation thresholds. Success often depends on convincing an adversary that refusing

to comply will result in progressively increasing costs. This requirement inevitably introduces greater uncertainty and strategic risk. Excessive force may provoke resistance, trigger horizontal or vertical escalation, strengthen enemy resolve, or generate wider conflict. Conversely, insufficient pressure may undermine credibility and encourage continued resistance. Effective compellence therefore requires careful calibration of means and ends, precise control over escalation dynamics, and continuous assessment of adversary responses (Schelling 1966; Jervis 1984a).

The effectiveness of compellence depends upon several interrelated factors. Credibility is essential because threats that are unsupported by demonstrated capability and political will are unlikely to produce behavioural change. Capability itself encompasses not only military resources but also economic strength, technological sophistication, alliance support, and informational influence. Communication is equally important because adversaries must clearly understand both the demands being imposed and the consequences of non-compliance. Finally, proportionality ensures that coercive measures remain linked to realistic political objectives rather than becoming punitive actions that weaken prospects for eventual compliance.

In contemporary security environments, compellence increasingly relies on cumulative pressure rather than decisive battlefield outcomes. Modern military campaigns often combine limited force, strategic signalling, selective strikes, cyber operations, economic measures, and information activities to create a progressively deteriorating situation for the adversary. Rather than defeating an opponent through outright military destruction, the objective is to convince decision-makers that continued resistance is unsustainable and that compliance offers a preferable alternative. This approach reflects the growing importance of precision engagement, information superiority, and strategic communication in modern conflict.

Compellence primarily operates in the competitive and crisis phases of the strategic continuum, where limited force, coercive signalling, and demonstrations of capability can influence adversary decision-making before large-scale hostilities occur. During these phases, compellence may take the form of forward deployments, military exercises, maritime interdictions, airspace challenges, cyber operations, or selective strikes. Each of these activities seeks to impose costs, communicate resolve, and shape adversary calculations whilst preserving opportunities for negotiation and de-escalation.

In the cooperative phase, compellence is generally less visible but not entirely absent. Military presence operations, security cooperation programmes, training missions, and capacity-building initiatives may reassure allies and partners while simultaneously influencing competitor behaviour. These activities communicate preparedness, commitment, and strategic resolve without crossing the threshold into overt coercion. As a result, they indirectly contribute to the broader coercive environment in which strategic competition occurs.

During periods of heightened crisis, compellence becomes increasingly explicit. States may mobilise military forces, deploy strategic assets, impose economic sanctions, conduct cyber operations, or undertake limited military strikes intended to influence decision-making. Such actions exploit uncertainty and time pressure to persuade adversaries that compliance is the most prudent course of action. Crisis compellence therefore combines military pressure with diplomatic engagement and strategic communication to shape behaviour before conflict escalates further.

During armed conflict, compellence assumes its most direct form. Military operations may compel withdrawal from occupied territory, acceptance of ceasefire arrangements, compliance with negotiated agreements, or participation in peace processes. In such circumstances, military force serves not merely to destroy enemy capabilities but to generate political outcomes by

influencing adversary decision-making. Even during major wars, compellence often remains focused on achieving specific political objectives rather than unconditional defeat.

Effective compellence requires close coordination among political authorities, armed forces, intelligence agencies, diplomatic institutions, and allied partners. Each actor performs distinct but interdependent functions that contribute to overall coercive effectiveness.

At the strategic level, national leadership defines political objectives, sets escalation thresholds, and determines when to apply coercive measures. Heads of state, governments, and national security councils articulate demands, provide legitimacy, and ensure political coherence. Defence and foreign ministers translate political intent into military posture, economic measures, and diplomatic signalling. Political clarity matters because adversaries must understand what behaviour is demanded and what benefits compliance provides. Compellence frequently fails when objectives are ambiguous, unrealistic, or constantly changing (Schelling 1966; Art 2003b).

Armed forces serve as the principal instruments through which coercive pressure is operationalised. Joint and combined commands plan and execute military activities across the land, maritime, air, cyber, and space domains. Demonstrations of force, maritime interceptions, strategic deployments, air patrols, military exercises, and precision strikes all convey capability and resolve. Through these activities, military forces provide the tangible means through which political demands acquire credibility.

The concept of the tripwire force provides a useful example. A limited forward-deployed military presence may not possess sufficient combat power to defeat an adversary independently, but its existence signals commitment and raises the political and military costs of aggression. Such deployments therefore serve both deterrent and compellent purposes by shaping adversary perceptions of risk.

Intelligence organisations play a vital enabling role. Effective compellence depends upon understanding adversary motivations, perceptions, leadership psychology, risk tolerance, and decision-making processes. Intelligence assessments help identify vulnerabilities, evaluate responses, and monitor whether coercive measures are producing the intended effects. Many failures of compellence arise not from insufficient force but from inaccurate assumptions regarding adversary behaviour and perceptions (Jervis 1984b).

Alliances and coalitions can significantly strengthen compellent strategies. Collective action increases legitimacy, pools resources, expands military capabilities, and enhances political influence. Alliance unity also reinforces credibility by demonstrating broad support for coercive measures and reducing opportunities for adversaries to exploit divisions among partners.

In contemporary strategic competition, compellence and coercion are not substitutes for deterrence but complementary uses of force within a broader framework of military power. Where deterrence seeks to prevent action, compellence seeks to alter behaviour and shape outcomes. Both rely on credibility, capability, communication, and strategic integration. However, compellence demands greater political discipline, more precise signalling, a deeper understanding of adversary decision-making, and greater risk tolerance. When effectively executed, it enables states to transform military pressure into political influence and achieve strategic objectives without necessarily resorting to unrestricted warfare. As competition increasingly unfolds across multiple domains and below the threshold of major war, compellence is likely to remain one of the most important and sophisticated uses of force available to contemporary states.

5.4. Posturing

Posturing is the category of strategic use of military power through which states deliberately employ visible positioning, deployment, readiness, and demonstrations of military capabilities to shape the perceptions and behaviour of allies, partners, adversaries, and other relevant actors without resorting to immediate combat. Unlike deterrence, which seeks to prevent specific actions through the threat of unacceptable costs, or compellence, which aims to induce behavioural change through coercive pressure, posturing operates primarily through strategic signalling. Its principal purpose is to communicate political intent, military preparedness, alliance cohesion, and strategic resolve while preserving decision-makers' freedom of action and avoiding unnecessary escalation. In contemporary security environments characterised by persistent competition below the threshold of armed conflict, posturing has become an indispensable mechanism linking military capability with political influence and strategic communication.

Modern posturing extends far beyond the traditional movement or concentration of military forces. It encompasses a broad spectrum of military activities, including forward deployments, rotational presence, multinational exercises, freedom of navigation operations, strategic bomber patrols, expeditionary deployments, enhanced readiness measures, and the visible integration of allied forces. These activities are undertaken not only for their operational value but because they communicate intentions and capabilities to multiple audiences simultaneously. As the chapter demonstrates, military posture therefore functions as an instrument of influence whose effectiveness depends on credibility, consistency, and political coherence rather than the immediate application of force.

The strategic significance of posturing derives from its ability to bridge military capability and statecraft. Military deployments, overseas basing, multinational exercises, and persistent presence shape expectations well beyond their immediate tactical effects by demonstrating both states' capability and willingness to defend interests, support allies, and respond rapidly to crises. Such visible manifestations of military readiness reinforce political commitments while simultaneously increasing uncertainty for potential adversaries. Consequently, posture should not be understood merely as the geographical disposition of forces but as the deliberate communication of strategic intent through military means.

The contemporary strategic environment has significantly expanded the importance of posturing. Renewed great-power competition, technological innovation, hybrid threats, and contested operational domains require military forces to maintain persistent visibility without unnecessarily provoking escalation. Precision-strike capabilities, anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) systems, cyber operations, electronic warfare, and space-enabled surveillance have transformed the strategic environment in which military posture is established and interpreted. Consequently, effective posturing increasingly depends upon resilient command and control, protected communications, distributed deployments, strategic mobility, cyber resilience, and multidomain integration rather than the simple concentration of conventional forces.

The theoretical foundations of posturing are closely associated with the concept of strategic signalling developed by Thomas Schelling (1966). Military capability acquires political influence only when it is communicated in a manner that convinces other actors of both its credibility and the political resolve supporting it. Military deployments, readiness demonstrations, exercises, and visible reinforcement therefore function less as preparations for immediate combat than as mechanisms to shape expectations and influence strategic calculations. Strategic communication and military posture together form a coherent signalling process that reduces uncertainty among allies while increasing uncertainty for potential

adversaries. This relationship between military posture and strategic communication also appears in contemporary analyses of diplomatic leverage, where credible military backing strengthens negotiation without requiring force (Fearon 1997; Freedman 2013).

Posturing also reflects many of the principles associated with Liddell Hart's (1967) indirect approach. Rather than seeking decisive battlefield victory, visible military preparedness aims to shape perceptions, alter strategic calculations, and preserve stability by influencing the psychological dimension of competition. The value of military posture therefore lies not primarily in its destructive potential but in its capacity to discourage miscalculation, reassure partners, and reinforce strategic credibility. Properly calibrated posture creates favourable political conditions while avoiding unnecessary confrontation, showing that military influence often depends as much on restraint as on coercive capability. This understanding aligns with contemporary concepts of military influence operating below the threshold of armed conflict.

Within alliance structures, posturing performs an equally important integrative function. The chapter shows that assurance differs from deterrence because its primary audience is allies rather than adversaries. Nevertheless, assurance relies heavily upon visible military posture to communicate reliability and collective resolve. Forward-deployed battlegroups, rotational deployments, multinational headquarters, air policing missions, naval task groups, IAMD, and combined exercises demonstrate that political commitments are supported by tangible military capability. These activities simultaneously strengthen alliance cohesion, reinforce interoperability, reduce fears of abandonment, and complicate adversary calculations by demonstrating that aggression against one ally would trigger a coordinated multinational response (Walt 1987; Snyder 1997; Jervis 1984b).

As strategic competition intensifies, posturing assumes a more explicit signalling role. Forward presence, rotational deployments, multinational exercises, maritime patrols, freedom of navigation operations, and persistent air operations communicate readiness, operational reach, and alliance cohesion while deliberately remaining below the threshold of armed conflict. Rather than provoking confrontation, these activities seek to deny a potential adversary's confidence that coercive actions could achieve rapid political success. Military posture therefore becomes a mechanism for preserving strategic stability through continuous demonstration of preparedness and political resolve.

During crises, posturing becomes more dynamic as visible reinforcement measures give political leaders flexible response options. Deploying rapid-reaction forces, expeditionary formations, enhanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets, maritime task groups, airborne units, and additional logistical capabilities demonstrates the ability to respond rapidly while preserving opportunities for diplomatic de-escalation. Such posture management stabilises allied expectations, constrains adversary decision-making, and reinforces deterrence by translating political commitments into immediately observable military action. NATO's adjustments following the Ukraine crisis illustrate how military posture functions simultaneously as reassurance, crisis management, and strategic signalling.

Even during armed conflict, military posture retains strategic relevance beyond combat operations themselves. The integration of multinational command structures, shared logistics, interoperability arrangements, sustained forward presence, and coordinated reinforcement demonstrates continuing alliance cohesion and political unity while enabling effective military operations. Consequently, posture remains both an operational enabler and a strategic communication instrument throughout the entire spectrum of conflict.

Military posture can no longer be understood exclusively through the physical deployment of land, maritime, or air forces. Contemporary military posture increasingly incorporates cyber

readiness, resilient space architectures, multidomain command and control, integrated intelligence networks, electromagnetic resilience, strategic communications, and information operations. These capabilities may not always be publicly visible, yet they contribute significantly to strategic signalling by demonstrating technological sophistication, operational resilience, and the capacity to generate integrated effects across multiple domains. Consequently, posturing has evolved into a multidomain activity combining physical presence with informational, cyber, and space-enabled capabilities that collectively reinforce strategic credibility.

The practical effectiveness of posturing ultimately depends upon coherence between political objectives, military capability, and strategic communication. Visible military deployments alone cannot generate influence unless credible political commitment, sustained readiness, interoperable force structures, and consistent diplomatic messaging support them. Conversely, discrepancies between declared intentions and military posture undermine credibility and reduce strategic influence. Military posture therefore requires continuous coordination between political authorities, military planners, alliance institutions, and strategic communication organisations to ensure that military activities consistently reinforce broader strategic objectives rather than creating ambiguity or unintended escalation (Fearon 1997; Freedman 2013).

The posturing represents considerably more than the physical deployment of armed forces. It constitutes a category of the strategic use of military power through which military capability is transformed into political influence by communicating credibility, resolve, readiness, and alliance solidarity. Operating continuously across the competition continuum, posturing connects military preparedness with diplomatic engagement, reassurance, deterrence, and crisis management while preserving freedom of political choice below the threshold of war. As a result, posturing has become an essential mechanism through which contemporary armed forces shape the strategic environment, reinforce alliance cohesion, manage escalation, and maintain credible military influence without immediately applying force.

5.5. Offence

Offence encompasses military operations intended to seize and maintain the initiative, defeat opposing forces, capture territory, and impose political objectives through proactive action. Historically regarded as the decisive form of warfare, offensive operations seek to create conditions under which an adversary loses both military capability and political freedom of action. While the character of offensive action has evolved significantly, its fundamental purpose remains unchanged: to compel an opponent to accept a political outcome through the effective application of military power.

Classical strategic thought placed considerable emphasis on the offensive. Clausewitz (1976) argued that although defence was the stronger form of war, victory ultimately required offensive action capable of imposing one's will upon the enemy. Decisive results could only be achieved by concentrating military effort against an adversary's centre of gravity, thereby undermining both physical capability and political resolve. Offensive action was therefore viewed not merely as the destruction of enemy forces, but as the means through which military success could be translated into political effect.

Later theorists challenged purely attritional approaches to offensive warfare. Liddell Hart's (1967) theory of the indirect approach argued that strategic success was more likely to result from manoeuvre, surprise, psychological dislocation, and operational flexibility than from costly frontal assaults. Rather than destroying an enemy through direct confrontation, offensive operations should create conditions in which resistance becomes ineffective, irrelevant, or

unsustainable. Many aspects of contemporary operational art reflect these ideas through precision strike systems, deep operations, multidomain manoeuvre, and the integration of military and informational effects-

Modern offensive operations differ substantially from historical conceptions centred upon massed armies and territorial conquest. Contemporary offensives increasingly seek systemic rather than purely physical effects. Rather than focusing exclusively on destroying enemy formations, commanders target command systems, logistics networks, communications infrastructure, information systems, and decision-making processes. Advances in precision-guided munitions, intelligence collection, cyber capabilities, and space-enabled surveillance enable offensive forces to influence an adversary's ability to sense, decide, move, communicate, and sustain operations.

Consequently, offence now extends across multiple domains. Land manoeuvre remains important, but offensive activity increasingly incorporates air and missile strikes, cyber operations, electromagnetic attack, information activities, and space-enabled effects. The objective is to generate cumulative disruption that reduces the adversary's capacity to function as a coherent military and political system. Offensive operations are therefore judged not solely by territory seized or forces destroyed, but by their ability to create strategic paralysis, degrade decision-making, and achieve political objectives. In this context, offensive action seeks not merely battlefield success but systemic disruption, creating conditions that allow friendly forces to maintain initiative while denying adversaries the ability to respond effectively.

Rather than a single act, modern offence is increasingly conducted as an integrated campaign that combines military, informational, technological, and political effects. This evolution reflects the growing recognition that strategic success depends less upon the outright destruction of enemy forces than upon the ability to influence decision-making, disrupt critical systems, and shape the broader operational environment.

Offence represents the most direct and decisive application of military power. It constitutes the capacity of armed forces to conduct integrated combat operations capable of defeating adversaries, imposing decisive costs, and securing political objectives when other instruments of statecraft prove insufficient. Although warfighting is most closely associated with periods of armed conflict, its success depends on preparations undertaken long before hostilities begin. Readiness, modernisation, force design, training, industrial capacity, doctrinal development, and strategic planning all contribute to the ability to conduct offensive operations effectively.

The theoretical foundations of offensive operations remain anchored in Clausewitz's conception of war as the continuation of politics by other means. Warfare unfolds under conditions of uncertainty, friction, and chance, where outcomes depend not only upon material resources but also upon leadership, organisational effectiveness, morale, and adaptability (Clausewitz 1976). Contemporary studies of military effectiveness reinforce this conclusion. Biddle's analysis of military power highlights the importance of force employment and operational competence, while Posen's work on military doctrine demonstrates how organisational choices shape battlefield effectiveness (Biddle 2004; Posen 1984). Advanced military capabilities generate advantage only when integrated with sound operational art, disciplined command, and effective leadership.

Effective offensive operations depend on coordinated action across political, military, and institutional levels. At the strategic level, political leadership defines the objectives that military operations are intended to achieve. Operational commanders play a central role in connecting tactical actions with strategic objectives. Through operational art, they design campaigns, sequence operations, allocate resources, and integrate effects across domains. Modern

operational concepts emphasise agility, decentralised execution, resilient command-and-control systems, and rapid decision-making. Although technology enhances situational awareness and coordination, leadership judgement and adaptability remain critical determinants of success.

At the tactical and functional levels, specialised forces generate complementary effects across the battlespace. Special operations forces conduct precision engagements and shaping activities. Cyber and electromagnetic units disrupt adversary networks and communications. Air and long-range strike assets deliver precision effects against critical targets. Land and maritime manoeuvre forces seize, control, and exploit terrain and maritime space. ISR networks provide the information necessary for informed decision-making and rapid adaptation. Together, these capabilities create cumulative pressure across the entire adversary system.

Supporting structures are equally important. Logistics organisations, sustainment units, mobility forces, training establishments, defence industries, and doctrinal institutions provide the foundations upon which offensive operations depend. Recent conflicts have shown that resilient supply chains, industrial capacity, ammunition production, and sustainment systems are decisive components of combat power, not merely supporting functions.

Although offensive operations are most visible during armed conflict, their foundations are established across the entire competition continuum. During cooperative phases, military forces prepare for future offensive effectiveness through multinational exercises, doctrinal harmonisation, interoperability initiatives, and integrating C4ISR architectures. These activities foster trust, establish common procedures, and improve technical compatibility among partners and allies. Although non-escalatory, they significantly enhance future coalition warfighting capability.

In competitive phases, preparations become more visible. States modernise military capabilities, strengthen mobilisation systems, improve force posture, and conduct theatre-shaping activities. Intelligence collection, cyber preparation, large-scale exercises, and the pre-positioning of equipment enhance readiness and strengthen the capacity to conduct offensive operations should conflict occur. These activities also influence adversary perceptions by demonstrating preparedness and capability.

During crisis phases, preparations for offensive action become tangible and operationally relevant. Forces deploy to advantageous positions, contingency plans activate, command structures strengthen, and strike capabilities become visible. These measures strengthen political signalling while giving leaders credible military options. The United States force build-up prior to Operation Desert Storm remains a prominent example of how readiness and deployment can shape strategic calculations before combat begins.

In armed conflict, offensive operations reach their full expression. Modern operations combine land manoeuvre, air superiority, maritime control, cyber activities, space operations, special operations, and integrated fires to achieve military and political objectives. Offensive campaigns seek to degrade command structures, disrupt logistics and sustainment, weaken decision-making systems, and undermine operational cohesion. Rather than relying solely on attrition or territorial conquest, contemporary offensive operations focus on generating systemic effects that produce cumulative strategic advantage.

Offensive operations impose demanding requirements upon modern armed forces. Contemporary militaries must be prepared to conduct sustained multidomain operations against sophisticated adversaries that can contest freedom of action across land, maritime, air, cyber, and space domains. This requirement places a premium on readiness, resilience, and integration. Forces must maintain protected C4ISR architectures, robust logistics networks, secure

communications, and the ability to synchronise effects across multiple domains under conditions of intense pressure. Force design, doctrine, training, procurement, and industrial planning must work together to ensure that emerging technologies contribute to operational effectiveness rather than existing as isolated capabilities.

The growing importance of information superiority, cyber operations, and space-enabled systems further increases the need for integrated force structures that can operate within complex multidomain operating environments. At the same time, recent conflicts have reaffirmed the continuing importance of leadership, morale, organisational adaptability, and sustained logistical support. Technology may enhance effectiveness, but it cannot eliminate the uncertainty, friction, and human dimension that continue to characterise warfare.

Ultimately, offensive operation represents the ultimate expression of military power: the ability to impose decisive outcomes despite uncertainty, resistance, and opposition. Prepared during periods of cooperation, refined through competition and crisis, and executed during conflict, offensive capability remains a central instrument of national strategy. Its success depends not on technology alone, but on the effective integration of political purpose, operational art, organisational competence, and human judgement. Through this integration, offensive action continues to provide states with the means to secure strategic objectives, defeat adversaries, and shape the political outcomes of war.

5.6. Miscellaneous

The growing importance of miscellaneous use of military power imposes substantial demands on modern armed forces. Military organisations must operate across a broad spectrum of missions that require adaptability, strategic mobility, resilient logistics, interoperable command arrangements, and effective civil-military cooperation.

These activities also require capabilities traditionally considered secondary to combat operations, including strategic communication, defence engagement, humanitarian support, partnership building, crisis management, and institutional development. Success increasingly depends on integrating military instruments with diplomatic, informational, economic, and civilian efforts within a comprehensive approach to security.

Miscellaneous uses of military power demonstrate that military power extends far beyond conventional warfighting. Armed forces remain instruments of policy across the entire competition continuum, contributing to crisis management, humanitarian relief, peace support, maritime security, alliance reassurance, military diplomacy, security cooperation, and international stability.

In an era characterised by persistent competition, hybrid threats, and complex security challenges, the strategic importance of these activities continues to grow. Military forces are increasingly employed not only to fight wars, but also to prevent conflict, reassure allies, support governance, protect populations, strengthen institutions, and enable diplomatic engagement. The result is a military instrument that operates continuously across peace, crisis, and conflict, shaping the international environment through influence, cooperation, presence, and stability as much as through the application of force itself.

Miscellaneous use of force encompasses a broad range of military activities conducted outside major combat operations. These include peace support operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, counter-smuggling and counter-piracy missions, alliance reassurance, military diplomacy, capacity-building, crisis response, and other national and international security tasks. Although they generally occur below the threshold of sustained

armed conflict, they remain important instruments of national policy and contribute directly to strategic objectives (Jordan 2016).

Clausewitz's proposition that war is an instrument of policy remains relevant here. Military forces continue to serve political purposes even when violence is limited or absent. Contemporary strategic competition increasingly unfolds between peace and war, requiring armed forces to contribute to security, stability, deterrence, reassurance, and international cooperation on a continuous basis. As a result, the distinction between peacetime and wartime military activity has become increasingly unclear.

Stability Operations and Crisis Management

Stability operations represent one of the most important non-combat applications of military force. They aim to prevent the escalation or recurrence of conflict, support legitimate governance, protect civilian populations, and establish conditions for sustainable peace. Rather than focusing on defeating an adversary, these operations seek to shape the security environment and reinforce political legitimacy through an integrated civil-military approach. Military forces therefore operate alongside diplomatic, humanitarian, and development actors in support of broader political objectives.

Peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions illustrate this role. Under United Nations, NATO, European Union, or coalition mandates, military forces monitor ceasefires, separate belligerents, protect civilians, secure critical infrastructure, and support political settlements. Peacekeeping relies on consent, impartiality, and limited force, whereas peace enforcement may involve more robust measures when consent is absent or fragile. In both cases, military activities support long-term political stabilisation rather than conventional military victory.

Crisis management missions similarly demonstrate how military forces contribute to security without necessarily engaging in major combat. Rapid deployment forces, military mobility assets, intelligence capabilities, and civil-military coordination mechanisms provide governments and international organisations with options for managing instability, preventing escalation, and supporting diplomatic initiatives. NATO doctrine places crisis prevention and crisis response among the Alliance's core security functions, highlighting the strategic value of military forces below the threshold of war.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)

HADR missions are among the most visible and widely recognised non-combat uses of military force. Armed forces have unique capabilities in logistics, transportation, engineering, communications, medical support, and command and control that enable rapid, large-scale responses to natural disasters, humanitarian emergencies, and public crises.

Military support often includes strategic airlift and sealift, emergency engineering, restoring essential infrastructure, delivering humanitarian aid, evacuation operations, and establishing secure conditions for civilian relief agencies. Although military forces generally support rather than lead humanitarian efforts, their ability to operate in austere and rapidly changing environments makes them indispensable during major emergencies.

Beyond immediate relief, such operations contribute to regional stability, strengthen relationships with partner nations, and enhance public confidence in national institutions. HADR missions therefore generate both humanitarian and strategic effects, reinforcing legitimacy and helping to prevent instability from developing into broader security challenges.

Security Operations and Capacity Building

Military forces routinely conduct a variety of security tasks that fall short of conventional warfare. These include counterinsurgency support, internal security assistance, maritime security operations, counter-piracy missions, and counter-smuggling activities. Such operations aim to protect populations, secure critical infrastructure, preserve freedom of navigation, and sustain international order.

At sea, military forces help protect maritime trade routes and the security of the global commons through patrols, surveillance, maritime interdiction operations, and multinational security initiatives. These missions support economic stability, enforce international law, and deter illicit activities without necessarily requiring high-intensity combat.

Another important function is security assistance and capacity-building. Through advisory missions, military training, defence cooperation programmes, and Security Sector Reform (SSR) initiatives, armed forces help partner states develop sustainable defence and security institutions. These activities improve professional standards, enhance command and control, strengthen logistics and sustainment systems, and promote accountable civil-military relations. Their ultimate purpose is to build self-sustaining security capacity, thereby reducing instability and preventing future crises.

Alliance Reassurance and Security Cooperation

Assurance and alliance support represent a further category of military activity conducted outside combat operations. Through forward presence, rotational deployments, multinational exercises, integrated command structures, and defence engagement, military forces reinforce confidence among allies and partners and demonstrate the credibility of collective defence commitments.

Alliance theory emphasises reassurance to reduce fears of abandonment and strengthen cohesion among alliance members (Walt 1987; Snyder 1997). NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, multinational battlegroups, combined exercises, and integrated air and missile defence arrangements exemplify assurance in practice. These activities support deterrence while maintaining political solidarity and operational integration.

Military cooperation extends beyond formal alliances. Defence diplomacy, military exchanges, training initiatives, and security cooperation programmes strengthen interoperability, build trust, and foster common strategic perspectives among partners. Such activities help create a stable security environment while reducing the likelihood of misunderstanding and miscalculation.

Military Diplomacy and Strategic Signalling

Military power often serves diplomatic purposes without being employed in combat. Diplomatic leverage derives from states' ability to influence perceptions, expectations, and strategic calculations through diplomatic engagement reinforced by credible military capability (Kattimani 2022).

Forward-deployed forces, readiness activities, multinational exercises, officer exchanges, and defence cooperation programmes contribute to diplomatic influence by demonstrating resolve and reinforcing commitments. Military capabilities lend credibility to diplomatic initiatives by shaping perceptions of capability, willingness, and reliability (Waltz 1979; Peter 2025; Fearon 1997).

Strategic signalling is central to this process. Military deployments, exercises, maritime patrols, and freedom-of-navigation operations communicate political intent and strategic resolve to allies, partners, and potential adversaries. Effective signalling requires close coordination between political and military authorities to ensure that military posture supports diplomatic objectives and reduces the risk of miscalculation (Freedman 2013).

Power Projection and Persistent Presence

Power projection constitutes another important miscellaneous use of force. While traditionally associated with expeditionary warfare, it increasingly functions as a means of maintaining presence, influence, and responsiveness across the competition continuum. Power projection enables states to deploy, sustain, and employ military capabilities beyond national territory in support of political objectives (Kennedy 1987; Posen 2003; Gray 2015).

Forward-deployed forces, rotational deployments, multinational exercises, overseas bases, maritime patrols, and humanitarian missions all contribute to strategic reach. These activities demonstrate commitment, reinforce alliances, and give decision-makers flexible response options without necessarily requiring the use of combat power.

In contemporary security environments, power projection is increasingly characterised by persistent presence, multidomain integration, and long-term engagement. It supports deterrence, reassurance, crisis response, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic influence, making it a continuous instrument of statecraft rather than a capability reserved exclusively for wartime operations.

Conclusions

The analysis shows that military power should be understood as a continuum of political-military activity rather than a phenomenon confined to armed conflict. Military power derives its strategic significance not from possessing military capabilities alone, but from their purposeful employment in support of clearly defined political objectives. Across the six categories, the central finding is that military force can serve fundamentally different political purposes—from protecting the existing political and territorial order and preventing aggression to influencing behaviour, shaping perceptions, creating favourable strategic conditions, and achieving political objectives through combat.

The analysis also confirms the importance of distinguishing political purpose from operational employment. The same military capability or activity may produce different strategic effects depending on the political context, the intended audience, how it is communicated, and the behaviour it seeks to influence. Consequently, assessing military force cannot be based solely on the scale, intensity, or physical effects of military action. It must also consider the intended political outcome, the perceptions generated among relevant actors, and the broader strategic consequences. This reflects the wider theoretical finding that military action may achieve strategic effects without direct combat and that immediate military results do not necessarily correspond to the ultimate political outcome.

A further outcome is that the six categories should not be regarded as isolated or mutually exclusive forms of military activity. They constitute complementary and often overlapping mechanisms through which military power can be translated into political influence. The practical strategic use of military power is therefore better understood as an integrated process in which different mechanisms reinforce one another across the competition continuum.

The analysis further highlights the growing importance of the multidomain character of contemporary military power. Effective military employment increasingly depends on integrating land, maritime, air, cyber, space, electromagnetic, informational, and cognitive capabilities. Technological sophistication alone, however, does not guarantee strategic effectiveness. Military capabilities must be supported by readiness, resilience, interoperability, sustainment, effective command and control, organisational competence, political credibility, and strategic communication. The ability to translate available capabilities into coherent, credible effects is therefore more important than possessing individual advanced systems.

Finally, the analysis confirms that contemporary military power operates continuously across cooperation, competition, crisis, and armed conflict. The distinction between peacetime and wartime employment has consequently become increasingly blurred. Military presence, exercises, defence engagement, crisis response, humanitarian assistance, capacity building, and other activities performed below the threshold of sustained armed conflict can generate significant political and strategic effects. Military power should therefore be understood as a multidimensional instrument of statecraft that combines combat capability with influence, signalling, reassurance, coercion, resilience, and stabilisation.

Overall, the six-category framework provides a coherent analytical basis for assessing how military capabilities are transformed into political effects. Its principal value lies in shifting the focus from the physical application of force towards the relationship between military means, political purpose, intended effects, and strategic consequences. This perspective underscores the continuing versatility of military power as an instrument of national policy in both peace and war.

6. MAJOR ELEMENTS OF THE MILITARY INSTRUMENT OF NATIONAL POWER

The military instrument of national power comprises five foundational elements that together enable a state to generate, coordinate, and employ force for strategic purposes. These elements, material, organisational, human, technological, and institutional, form the structural and functional backbone of military capability. Each represents a distinct dimension of military power, yet their effectiveness comes not from their isolated presence but from how they interact and reinforce one another within a coherent strategic system.

While different analytical frameworks emphasise particular aspects of military capability, these five elements can be understood as foundational inputs that must be translated into operational capacity through interconnected components. These components include force structure and design; doctrine and operational concepts; jointness and interoperability; readiness and sustainability; training and PME; logistics, sustainment, and mobility; the defence industrial base and military technology; C4ISR; alliances, partnerships, and access arrangements; and political–military integration. Together, these components convert underlying resources into usable military capability and shape the strategic effectiveness of armed forces.

The following sections consequently shift analytical focus from elements to components, examining how these mechanisms organise, combine, and activate material, human, organisational, technological, and institutional resources into coherent military power.

6.1. Material Element

The material element constitutes the physical foundation of the military instrument of power. It is the tangible substrate of national force, comprising weapons systems, platforms, infrastructure, industrial capacity, and logistical resources that enable the generation and application of organised violence. While strategy, doctrine, and leadership provide direction, and human and institutional factors shape political intent and the will to act, the material element supplies the concrete means through which military objectives can be pursued. It determines the scale, intensity, and duration of military operations and underpins both deterrence and warfighting capability (Freedman 2013).

Military strength rests not solely on the quantity or technological sophistication of platforms that a state fields, but on the broader industrial and logistical ecosystem that produces, sustains, repairs, and moves them. The term military–industrial complex, popularised by Eisenhower in 1961, captures important political dynamics of defence procurement and civil–military interaction, yet it reflects only one facet of a much wider strategic reality. A state’s ability to generate effective military power over time depends fundamentally on the depth, resilience, and technological sophistication of its industrial base (Gansler 2011). Without the capacity to manufacture high-precision components, replenish expendable munitions, overhaul complex systems, or sustain long-distance operations at scale, even the most technologically impressive force structure becomes strategically brittle (Mahnken 2010). Modern warfare repeatedly shows that the side that can sustain forces and regenerate combat power often prevails over the side that can merely deploy forces rapidly.

Material power therefore extends far beyond accumulating hardware. It reflects the quality, modernisation, integration, and availability of assets, as well as the industrial, logistical, and infrastructural depth that sustains them across domains and over time (Biddle 2004). In this sense, the material element represents not simply an inventory of equipment, but an integrated

material ecosystem that enables the projection, sustainment, protection, and regeneration of military power under conditions of attrition, disruption, and strategic competition.

At its most visible level, the material element encompasses combat platforms through which military effect is delivered. These include surface combatants, submarines, fighter and bomber aircraft, armoured vehicles, missile batteries, air- and missile-defence systems, long-range fires, and increasingly unmanned and autonomous systems. The effectiveness of these platforms depends not merely on numerical strength, but on technological sophistication, survivability, integration with sensors and command networks, interoperability with allied forces, and the maintenance and sustainment structures that keep them operational. Combat platforms thus function as both instruments of force and indicators of deeper industrial, logistical, and organisational capacity.

The material element also includes bases, installations, depots, and facilities that anchor military posture, readiness, and sustainment. Permanent and expeditionary bases provide sites for training, maintenance, command-and-control, intelligence fusion, ammunition storage, and force deployment. Forward operating sites and strategic mobility hubs enable rapid mobilisation, global power projection, and persistent presence in key theatres, directly shaping deterrence credibility and operational reach. The geographic distribution, accessibility, protection, and resilience of these facilities increasingly determine a military's ability to operate effectively in contested environments.

Logistics stockpiles constitute another central dimension of material power. Fuel reserves enable manoeuvre and sustainment; ammunition stockpiles support prolonged high-intensity combat; spare parts ensure platform availability; and pre-positioned equipment enables immediate crisis response without relying on long deployment timelines (Van Creveld 1977). Contemporary armed forces depend on complex, globally distributed supply chains that are often optimised for efficiency rather than resilience, making logistical depth and replenishment capacity decisive determinants of operational endurance and strategic staying power (RAND 2025).

Closely related is sustaining infrastructure, which encompasses transportation networks, ports, airfields, railways, pipelines, energy grids, digital communications systems, and industrial facilities. These systems enable the movement, coordination, and command of forces while supporting training, readiness, and industrial throughput (Gansler 2011). Degradation of sustaining infrastructure, whether through kinetic attack, cyber disruption, sabotage, or systemic failure, can rapidly undermine military effectiveness even when frontline combat units remain intact.

Physical protection systems further enhance the survivability of material power. Hardened shelters, missile-defence architectures, fortifications, dispersal measures, counter-UAS systems, and passive defence techniques are designed to preserve critical military assets against precision strike and hybrid attack. By reducing vulnerability and denying adversaries the prospect of rapid degradation of military power, these systems contribute directly to deterrence by denial and escalation control (Gray 2015).

Material elements directly shape force structure and capabilities by defining the composition, balance, and domains in which armed forces can operate, as well as the scale and duration of force they can sustain. Force structure thus represents not merely an organisational choice, but a material expression of national strategic priorities, industrial capacity, and political intent.

Material power is inseparable from defence manufacturing and innovation. A robust defence-industrial base is not a static collection of factories, but a dynamic socio-technical ecosystem

shaped by market structures, state investment, workforce capacity, and sustained technological innovation (Ruttan 2006). Competitive and diversified supplier networks reduce systemic risk and prevent single points of failure, particularly in critical sectors such as microelectronics, missile components, propulsion systems, and advanced materials (Gholz and Sapolsky 1999). Stable procurement cycles enable firms to invest in long-term capacity, preserve skilled labour, and avoid the boom–bust patterns that have historically undermined surge potential in Western defence industries (Lorell and Levaux 1998).

A highly skilled technical workforce, including engineers, machinists, systems integrators, software developers, and production specialists, is indispensable. Tacit expertise accumulated in shipbuilding, aerospace, and missile production is difficult to regenerate once lost, and shortages in these skills have been linked to production delays and cost overruns in major defence programs (Congressional Budget Office 2023). At the same time, intellectual-property protection and cybersecurity have become central to sustaining military innovation, as espionage and cyber intrusion increasingly threaten technological advantage (Lindsay 2020). Research institutions, national laboratories, and testing facilities further sustain long-term leadership by linking basic scientific research to applied military innovation (Mowery and Rosenberg 1998). States with ageing manufacturing infrastructures or inconsistent procurement strategies struggle to maintain even legacy systems, creating strategic brittleness and declining readiness (Bitzinger 2015). By contrast, states that align industrial policy, stable acquisition funding, and national innovation ecosystems, such as the United States, China, South Korea, and Israel, are better positioned to convert civilian technological dynamism into sustained military advantage (Cheung 2012; Samuels 1994).

Logistics, sustainment, and mobility form the operational bloodstream of the material element. Scholars from Martin van Creveld onward have emphasised that military forces often fail not because they lose battles, but because they exhaust their ability to move, supply, repair, and sustain operations at the required tempo. High-intensity conflicts show how quickly modern armed forces consume fuel, artillery ammunition, drones, and precision munitions, and how disrupting supply networks can halt operational momentum regardless of frontline performance (Watling and Reynolds 2022). Maintenance depots, repair facilities, and mobile sustainment units preserve platform readiness, while pre-positioned equipment and forward stockpiles dramatically shorten deployment timelines, as NATO’s enhanced forward presence in Eastern Europe illustrates. Sustaining logistics under combat conditions increasingly requires redundancy, dispersal, deception, and cyber-resilient command-and-control systems that can operate under persistent attack (Krepinevich 1992; Watling 2022).

In the contemporary strategic landscape, the logistical and industrial architectures of the United States and China have become central determinants of global military balance. The United States maintains a uniquely extensive global logistics system supported by overseas bases, pre-positioned stocks, and unmatched airlift and sealift capacity, enabling rapid intercontinental force projection and underpinning alliance credibility. China’s logistics capabilities for expeditionary operations, including port access arrangements, civil–military logistics integration, and the use of civilian maritime infrastructure, illustrate an expanding outward-facing logistics architecture beyond the Western Pacific (Peltier, Nurkin, and O’Connor 2020). Although their approaches differ, both states recognise that industrial capacity and logistics form the hidden architecture of military power, shaping not only near-term readiness but also endurance, influence, and long-term strategic competition.

6.2. Human Element

The human element constitutes the living core of the military instrument of national power. Regardless of how technologically advanced or materially well-equipped a military may be, its effectiveness ultimately rests on the knowledge, skill, discipline, motivation, and cohesion of the people who operate and support it. Military power is not generated by machines, platforms, or institutions alone, but by human beings who interpret strategy, make judgments under uncertainty, adapt to complex and contested environments, and shoulder the physical, psychological, and moral burdens of military service and combat. As Millett, Murray, and Watman (1986) demonstrated in their foundational study of military effectiveness, no technological system can compensate for deficiencies in leadership, training, cohesion, and morale.

The human element encompasses the full spectrum of military personnel and their development over time. This includes recruitment and retention, training and education, leadership cultivation, morale building, ethical conditioning, and the socialisation processes that transform civilians into members of a professional military institution. It determines the force's agility, competence, and resilience and shapes its capacity to adapt to rapidly evolving threats, operational demands, and technological change. The quality of military personnel, reflected in education levels, physical standards, cognitive skills, emotional resilience, and motivation, affects every aspect of force performance, from tactical execution and operational integration to strategic judgment and escalation management.

States confront different challenges in sustaining the human element based on demographic trends, labour markets, economic opportunity costs, and societal attitudes toward military service. Professional volunteer forces, such as those of the United States and the United Kingdom, tend to offer higher levels of specialisation, technical proficiency, and professional continuity, but they may struggle to maintain sufficient end strength and readiness during prolonged high-intensity conflict or sustained competition. By contrast, conscription-based systems, as employed by states such as Israel, South Korea, and Finland, provide greater manpower depth and societal integration, strengthening national resilience and mobilisation capacity, but they may face constraints in terms of professionalisation, specialisation, and force flexibility. These trade-offs illustrate that the human element is shaped not only by military policy but by broader societal structures and political choices.

At its core, the human element consists of uniformed personnel across all domains and specialities. Beyond combat troops, modern armed forces rely on intelligence analysts, cyber operators, engineers, logisticians, medical personnel, space and electronic warfare specialists, and a wide range of technical and professional experts. Their expertise directly shapes operational performance, adaptability, and the ability to integrate complex systems across domains. As military operations become increasingly multidomain and information-intensive, the cognitive and technical demands placed on personnel continue to rise, elevating the strategic importance of recruitment standards, education, and professional development.

PME plays a central role in developing this human capital. PME provides officers and non-commissioned leaders with the intellectual tools required to understand strategy, operational art, joint and combined warfighting, civil–military relations, and the political and ethical dimensions of military power. By cultivating critical thinking, doctrinal literacy, historical awareness, and strategic judgment, PME enables leaders to navigate uncertainty, manage escalation risks, and integrate military action with broader political objectives.

Training systems and exercise programs translate human potential into operational competence. Through regular training, simulations, field exercises, and multinational drills, forces develop tactical proficiency, discipline, interoperability, and readiness. Training instils muscle memory, reinforces organisational norms, and ensures that individuals can function effectively as members of larger units and joint formations. Empirical research has long demonstrated that differences in training intensity, realism, and institutional learning correlate strongly with battlefield outcomes (Dupuy 1987). Contemporary armed forces increasingly emphasise joint and combined-arms proficiency, adaptation to multidomain environments, cognitive and decision-making training under stress, and simulation-based and AI-enabled instruction. Recent high-intensity conflict in Ukraine has reinforced the importance of small-unit training, rapid skill acquisition, and leadership adaptability under conditions of sustained attrition and uncertainty.

Leadership development and command skills constitute another decisive dimension of the human element. Leadership at all levels has been consistently identified as a critical determinant of wartime performance, cohesion, and adaptability (Betts 1991). States invest heavily in leadership development systems to cultivate officers capable of critical thinking, operational integration, and strategic judgment. Comparative studies highlight that flexible, empowered leadership cultures, characterised by decentralised decision-making and initiative, tend to outperform rigid hierarchical models in innovation, resilience, and combat effectiveness (Rosen 1991; Cohen 2010). Effective commanders must inspire trust, manage risk, communicate intent clearly, and maintain cohesion under extreme stress. Leadership development fosters not only tactical competence but also ethical judgment, accountability, and the ability to align military action with political purpose.

Military culture, morale, and cohesion form the psychological foundation of the human element. A force's willingness to fight, endure hardship, and sustain effort under adverse conditions often outweighs material advantages. Historical and contemporary cases, from the Second World War through Vietnam, Afghanistan, and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, demonstrate that morale and cohesion can decisively shape outcomes, sometimes reversing expectations based on numerical strength or technological superiority alone (Kreps 2010; Mearsheimer 2018). Military culture shapes expectations of conduct, norms of professionalism, and commitment to mission, while high morale and strong unit cohesion enhance resilience, reduce psychological casualties, facilitate adaptation, and sustain operational performance over time.

The human element is tightly connected to several core components of military power. It directly determines readiness, training effectiveness, and the ability to translate doctrine into skilled practice. It shapes the personnel dimension of force structure, influencing specialisation, distribution, and functional capability. It underpins C4ISR by providing the analytical, cognitive, and decision-making expertise required to process information and generate operational advantage. Finally, it interfaces with civil-military institutions, where leadership norms and professional behaviours shape civil-military relations, political trust, and strategic alignment.

In this sense, the human element is not merely a supporting factor, but a central integrative force within the military instrument of national power. It binds material capability, organisational design, technological systems, and institutional governance into a functioning whole. Armed forces that invest effectively in human capital, through recruitment, education, training, leadership development, and cultural cohesion, are best positioned to adapt to uncertainty, manage escalation, and translate military potential into sustained strategic effect across the full spectrum of competition and conflict.

6.3. Organisational Element

The organisational element represents the structural and procedural backbone through which military power is coordinated, directed, and applied. While the material and human elements of military power define what forces can do, through equipment, technology, training, and skills, the organisational element determines how those capabilities are employed. It is the architecture that transforms raw potential into coherent action, aligning resources, personnel, and doctrine with strategic objectives (Posen 1984; Biddle 2004). Strong organisational design enables armed forces to integrate operations across multiple domains, act decisively in crises, and adapt to complex and unforeseen challenges, whereas fragmented or poorly coordinated structures can negate even technologically advanced or well-trained forces.

At the core of the organisational element lies command and control. Command-and-control architectures define the hierarchical and networked systems through which authority, decision-making, communication, and operational coordination flow. Effective command and control ensure unity of effort, rapid adaptation, and synchronised action across dispersed units and complex operating environments (Gray 2010; Biddle 2004). Contemporary C2 increasingly relies on networked, multidomain architectures that integrate land, air, maritime, cyber, space, and informational components. These systems support rapid decision cycles, shared situational awareness, and decentralised execution while preserving strategic coherence at higher levels of command (Murray 2011).

Organisational effectiveness further depends on joint, interagency, and multinational structures. Modern military operations rarely involve a single service acting in isolation. Joint integration enables armies, navies, air forces, cyber and space commands, and special operations forces to operate complementarily, leveraging distinct capabilities while avoiding redundancy and friction. Interagency integration aligns military operations with diplomacy, economic policy, intelligence, and domestic governance, an alignment that is particularly critical in stabilisation missions, hybrid conflict, and long-term competition. Combined and multinational structures extend this logic across alliances and partnerships, enabling coalition operations through shared doctrine, interoperable systems, and standardised procedures (Art 2003a; Krepinevich 2010a). These organisational arrangements are central to expeditionary warfare, peacekeeping, alliance reassurance, and multinational deterrence operations.

The organisational design of services, theatre commands, and specialised units directly shapes operational flexibility and adaptability. Strategic commands oversee large-scale planning and resource allocation, while operational and tactical commands tailor execution to specific missions and environments. As armed forces develop specialised capabilities in areas such as cyber operations, space, information warfare, and unmanned systems, organisational design must balance specialisation with integration to avoid stovepipes and ensure synergy across the force (Hoffman 2007; Rattray 2001). Well-designed organisational architectures facilitate rapid transition from peacetime posture to crisis response and wartime operations, while enhancing resilience under sustained operational pressure.

Strategic planning staff and institutionalised planning processes constitute another critical dimension of the organisational element. Political guidance needs to be translated into executable campaigns, contingency plans, and long-term capability development pathways. National objectives are linked with operational realities, ensuring coherence between strategy, doctrine, and force design. Effective planning processes incorporate risk assessment, scenario modelling, and resource prioritisation, enabling armed forces to anticipate evolving threats and adapt to complex, multidomain environments rather than reacting improvisationally under crisis conditions (Murray and Millett 1996; Biddle 2004).

Rules of engagement and operational frameworks are embedded within organisational structures and shape how force is applied legally, ethically, and politically. They set boundaries for action, deconflict joint and combined (multinational) operations, and ensure compliance with international law while giving commanders clear guidance under the stress of combat or crisis (Art 2003a). Clear, consistently applied operational frameworks reduce miscommunication, limit unintended escalation, minimise collateral damage, and enable predictable, credible application of military power across diverse operational contexts.

The organisational element does not operate in isolation; its effectiveness depends on seamless integration with other critical components of military power. Organisational structures bridge doctrine, strategy, and operational execution. Doctrine codifies principles of warfare and establishes norms for coordination across domains, while operational concepts translate those principles into practical plans and campaigns. Effective organisations keep doctrine adaptive rather than static, enabling commanders to integrate manoeuvre, fires, logistics, and intelligence to achieve strategic objectives under varying conditions (Posen 1984; Biddle 2004). Without appropriate organisational capacity, doctrinal innovation remains theoretical rather than operational.

Organisational design is also inseparable from C4ISR systems, which provide the informational backbone of modern military operations. C4ISR systems generate vast quantities of data, but only organisational integration can transform that data into timely decisions and coordinated action (Krepinevich 2010a). Network-centric operations, for example, depend on organisational coherence to fuse information from satellites, drones, cyber sensors, and human intelligence into actionable operational effects.

Political–military integration represents another essential interface of the organisational element. Military organisations operate within broader political and societal contexts, and effective organisational design ensures alignment between military operations, national policy, international commitments, and legal frameworks (Gray 2010; Krebs 2009). Organisational mechanisms enable civilian oversight, strategic guidance, and accountability while allowing military leaders to translate political objectives into operationally feasible plans. Failures in political–military integration, as demonstrated in cases ranging from Iraq and Afghanistan to various NATO stabilisation missions, can undermine effectiveness even when forces are materially and technologically superior.

Finally, organisational coherence underpins alliance management and interoperability. Alliances such as NATO depend on standardised organisational structures, shared doctrine, and interoperable command arrangements to integrate forces from multiple states under unified frameworks (Art 2003b; Krepinevich 2010a). Organisational mechanisms facilitate joint planning, intelligence sharing, logistics coordination, and command synchronisation, ensuring that coalition operations achieve strategic objectives without duplication or misalignment. Interoperability extends beyond hardware to include shared procedures, professional norms, and collaborative decision-making, all mediated through organisational design.

In sum, the organisational element anchors military effectiveness by integrating doctrine, technological systems, political guidance, and alliance commitments into a coherent operational whole. Organisations transform abstract capability into coordinated action, ensuring that forces operate efficiently, adaptively, and within legal and political constraints across the full spectrum of military activity. By enabling multidomain synergy, supporting informed decision-making, maintaining political alignment, and facilitating multinational coordination, the organisational element emerges as a central enabler of modern military power in an era defined by complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence (Biddle 2004; Hoffman 2007; Rattray 2001).

6.4. Technological Element

The technological element encompasses the scientific, engineering, and innovation capacities that enable armed forces to maintain a qualitative military edge and to operate effectively across increasingly complex and contested domains. Technology functions as a decisive force multiplier, enhancing the precision of military action, extending operational reach, increasing the survivability of personnel and platforms, and accelerating decision cycles through improved sensing, processing, and communication. In modern military power, technology does not substitute for strategy, organisation, or human skills, but it fundamentally shapes the conditions under which those elements can be employed.

In contemporary warfare, technological superiority allows even relatively small or numerically disadvantaged forces to achieve disproportionate strategic effects, reshaping both the character and conduct of conflict. This dimension of military power extends far beyond traditional weapons systems. It includes digital architecture, information networks, data-processing tools, autonomous and remotely piloted platforms, advanced sensors, and software-intensive capabilities that underpin modern MDOs. Developing, integrating, and exploiting such technologies depends on the strength of a state's industrial base, the scale and efficiency of its research and development investments, and the flexibility of its civil–military innovation ecosystems.

Technological sophistication fundamentally shapes the strategic options available to states. Innovations in weapons design, production processes, communications technologies, and computational power redefine not only how states fight but also what they can credibly attempt to achieve through armed force. Historically, successive technological revolutions, from gunpowder to nuclear weapons and, more recently, cyber and information technologies, have repeatedly transformed strategic incentives, altered operational art, and reconfigured the distribution of power within the international system (Parker 1996; Mahnken 2010). In the contemporary era, however, the decisive variable is less the possession of any single advanced technology than the capacity to integrate multiple technological subsystems into coherent, flexible, and adaptive military enterprises that generate synergistic effects across domains.

Technological competition increasingly unfolds at dual-use frontiers, where commercial and military innovation intersect. Many of the most strategically consequential technologies, AI, machine learning, quantum computing, hypersonic propulsion, nanomaterials, and advanced robotics, emerge primarily from civilian sectors characterised by rapid innovation cycles. This creates a structural challenge for military organisations, whose procurement, testing, and certification processes tend to be slower, risk-averse, and institutionally constrained. States with robust national innovation ecosystems, such as the United States, China, Israel, and South Korea, are thus better positioned to convert civilian technological dynamism into military advantage by experimenting rapidly, adopting emerging technologies at scale, and integrating them into doctrine and force design (Ruttan 2006). At the same time, rapid technological diffusion empowers smaller states and non-state actors. Commercial drones, satellite internet, encrypted communications, and open-source intelligence tools let actors with limited resources gather targeting information, coordinate operations, and run strategic communication campaigns. The democratisation of technology compresses the traditional distinction between high-end and low-end warfare, enabling irregular forces to contest technologically superior armed forces in unexpected and asymmetric ways.

Cyber tools and digital networks have emerged as central components of the technological element. Cyber power functions simultaneously as a strategic enabler and an operational weapon, supporting espionage, influence operations, disruption, and direct battlefield effects.

States employ cyber capabilities to conduct intelligence collection at scale, disrupt critical infrastructure such as power grids and logistics networks, and complement kinetic operations by suppressing air defences, degrading communications, or sowing confusion during crises or conflict. Cyber operations blur traditional distinctions between war and peace: peacetime intrusions may establish access for wartime effects, while attribution challenges complicate escalation control and deterrence. As a result, armed forces invest heavily in cyber force structures, defensive resilience, and offensive cyber capabilities designed to integrate with conventional fires and information operations (Lindsay 2013). Cyber tools also offer asymmetric opportunities, enabling weaker actors to impose disproportionate costs on technologically advanced armed forces.

Weapons systems and platform capabilities remain a core expression of technological power, but their significance increasingly lies in system-of-systems integration rather than isolated performance. Modern armed forces rely on an ecosystem of armoured vehicles, aircraft, naval vessels, missile systems, space assets, and the sensors, munitions, and data architectures that connect them. Precision-strike complexes, enabled by advances in guidance technologies, kill-chain automation, and long-range sensing, allow states to strike targets with exceptional accuracy, reducing reliance on massed fires while expanding the range of targetable objectives, from mobile missile launchers to critical infrastructure deep within adversary territory. Stealth, survivability, and counter-surveillance technologies respond to sensor-dense environments by degrading adversary ISR and fire-control systems, generating continuous offence–defence adaptation cycles. Network-centric and data-centric warfare further transforms military operations into distributed, information-rich engagements, increasing operational tempo while complicating adversary planning.

Space-based systems have become foundational to modern military operations, functioning as high-altitude nodes in global information and communication networks. Satellites provide persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; strategic warning; missile-launch detection; and wide-area situational awareness beyond terrestrial sensors. Military communications satellites ensure resilient, long-range connectivity and continuity of command, while global navigation constellations provide precision timing and positioning essential for guided munitions, manoeuvre, and logistics. As competition extends into orbit, space systems are increasingly designed for resilience and redundancy through distributed constellations, rapid launch capabilities, and protection against electronic and physical threats. In this environment, space superiority, maintaining access to one's own orbital assets while denying unimpeded use to adversaries, has become a prerequisite for effective operations in other domains.

AI has emerged as a critical force multiplier across the military enterprise. Machine-learning applications accelerate intelligence exploitation by automating the triage of vast sensor inputs, allowing human analysts to focus on anomalies and strategic indicators. In operations, AI shortens kill chains by enabling faster target recognition, threat prioritisation, and coordination of fires across domains. Beyond combat, AI enhances logistics forecasting, maintenance scheduling, and supply-chain resilience by identifying patterns indicative of system failures or disruption. In command-and-control, AI-enabled decision-support tools synthesise complex battlefield data to provide commanders with clearer situational awareness and recommended courses of action. These systems are designed to augment, not replace, human judgment, increasing tempo while reducing cognitive overload.

Autonomous and robotic platforms further extend technological reach by enabling distributed, risk-tolerant, and persistent operations. Unmanned aerial systems provide ISR, electronic warfare support, and precision strike without exposing aircrews to danger. Maritime robotics

expands awareness, mine countermeasures, and patrol capacity in contested littorals, while unmanned ground vehicles support reconnaissance, logistics resupply, and hazardous tasks such as breaching or demining. When integrated with AI and secure communications, these systems can saturate sensing zones, complicate adversary targeting, and absorb risks traditionally borne by personnel. Their growing affordability and scalability also enable swarm tactics that challenge traditional concepts of mass and manoeuvre.

Precision-guided munitions and advanced fires exemplify the integration of sensing, data, and delivery mechanisms. Modern fires rely on real-time information sharing, refined guidance, and digital targeting networks to deliver high-lethality, low-collateral-damage effects across extended ranges. Hypersonic systems promise further compression of adversary decision time, while advanced rocket artillery and missile forces provide long-range strike options tailored to contested anti-access and area-denial environments. Together, these developments reinforce a shift from attritional bombardment toward discriminating, network-enabled fires.

Finally, control of the EMS has become as vital as control of terrain, airspace, or sea lanes. Electronic warfare encompasses actions to detect, disrupt, degrade, or deceive adversary sensors and communications while protecting one's own systems. Offensive electronic warfare can blind surveillance networks and disrupt command-and-control, while defensive spectrum operations use frequency agility, encryption, emission control, and electronic protection to preserve system performance. As digital and software-defined systems proliferate, adaptation in the EMS becomes continuous and contested.

The technological element is closely connected to several core components of military power. It is rooted in the defence industrial base and national innovation systems that generate and sustain technological advancement. It underpins C4ISR by enabling sensing, communication, analysis, and command across domains. It shapes force structure by determining the qualitative capabilities available to military organisations. In combination with human skill, organisational coherence, and institutional governance, technology transforms military potential into operational and strategic effects.

6.5. Institutional Element

The institutional element encompasses the legal, bureaucratic, political, and normative frameworks that structure relationships among the military, the state, and society. It ensures that military power is exercised legitimately, accountably, and coherently, transforming political intent into actionable defence and security capabilities. Institutions regulate the use of force, define organisational priorities, oversee resource allocation, and provide continuity across political cycles. Healthy institutions underpin long-term force development, maintain civilian control of the military, harmonise interagency coordination, and sustain alliances and partnerships, forming the backbone of strategic governance (Gray 2010; Krebs 2009; Posen 1984).

Beyond enabling day-to-day governance, institutions provide the temporal depth necessary for military power to function across long strategic horizons. Military capabilities require decades to design, fund, and mature; institutions consequently allow states to sustain force development, alliance commitments, and doctrinal coherence despite electoral cycles, leadership turnover, or shifting public opinion. In this sense, institutions act as repositories of strategic memory, preserving lessons learned, standardising professional norms, and enabling cumulative adaptation rather than episodic reinvention. Where institutional continuity is weak, military power becomes reactive, uneven, and vulnerable to politicisation, undermining both credibility and effectiveness over time.

The institutional element includes several interrelated domains. National security governance structures include ministries of defence and foreign affairs, national security councils, executive departments, and legislative oversight bodies that collectively set strategic priorities and manage military employment. These structures translate political objectives into defence policy, arbitrate inter-service competition, and coordinate cross-governmental responses to crises (Biddle 2004; Boot 2002). Effective governance embeds military operations within broader national strategies, integrating diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of power. Specialised councils and interagency mechanisms conduct strategic assessments, integrate intelligence, and lead whole-of-government security initiatives, enabling coherent responses to complex challenges such as hybrid warfare, cyber operations, and great-power competition (Krepinevich 2010a; Rattray 2001).

Legal frameworks and civil–military relations regulate the legitimate use of force and ensure accountability. Constitutional provisions, national defence statutes, rules of engagement, and international law, including the law of armed conflict, define when and how military power may be applied (Gray 2010). Civilian political authority sets strategic direction, while professional military leadership advises on operational feasibility. Robust civil–military relations are sustained through parliamentary oversight, auditing bodies, and independent internal oversight mechanisms that guard against misuse of force and reinforce democratic legitimacy. These frameworks ensure that armed forces serve state and societal interests rather than partisan or private agendas, strengthening trust, cohesion, and strategic alignment (Krebs 2009; Kaldor 2012).

Budgeting and resource allocation processes constitute a critical institutional mechanism shaping the scale, structure, and sustainability of military forces. Multi-year planning cycles, programmatic reviews, and interagency negotiations prioritise resources across personnel, operations, procurement, and research (Posen 1984; Boot 2002). Effective budgeting balances immediate readiness with long-term modernisation, ensuring investment in emerging technologies, infrastructure, and training. Transparent financial management enhances public confidence, limits misallocation, and signals national priorities both domestically and internationally (Biddle 2004). Defence budgeting is therefore both a fiscal and a strategic process, directly influencing a military’s capacity to deter, deploy, and adapt.

Procurement and acquisition systems connect strategic requirements to operational capabilities by overseeing the development, testing, and fielding of military platforms and equipment. Effective institutional arrangements emphasise competition, life-cycle cost analysis, and rigorous evaluation to ensure capabilities meet operational needs efficiently (Boot 2002). Transparent acquisition practices reduce corruption, strengthen industrial accountability, and facilitate international collaboration in technology development and joint programs. As military systems become increasingly complex, integrating autonomous platforms, software-defined architectures, and C4ISR networks, procurement institutions must evolve toward agile, modular, and iterative approaches to remain technologically relevant in rapidly shifting operating environments (Hoffman 2007; Rattray 2001).

At the same time, institutional design can introduce constraints and vulnerabilities. Rigid bureaucratic procedures, fragmented authorities, politicised budgeting, or overly centralised acquisition systems can slow adaptation and lock armed forces into outdated capabilities. History shows that institutional inertia, rather than technological limits, is often the main obstacle to innovation. Effective institutional frameworks, hence, balance stability with flexibility, preserving oversight and accountability while allowing experimentation, decentralisation, and iterative learning in response to evolving threats.

Strategic planning institutions, including defence planning staffs, joint strategy offices, and war colleges, ensure alignment between national objectives and military capabilities. These bodies conduct scenario analysis, capability assessments, and force-structure planning, integrating intelligence insights, operational lessons, and inputs from scientific and industrial communities (Biddle 2004; Murray 2011). By maintaining continuity across political transitions, strategic planning institutions prevent reactive or fragmented force development and preserve coherence over decades, guiding modernisation, doctrine development, and readiness in response to changing security environments.

Alliance commitments and treaty regimes extend a state's military reach and strategic credibility. Bilateral and multilateral security arrangements provide access to shared intelligence, interoperability standards, collective defence guarantees, and regional basing rights. Treaty regimes governing arms control, non-proliferation, maritime security, and airspace coordination establish predictable rules that reduce miscalculation and stabilise military interaction (Schelling 1966; Art 2003b). Participation in multinational institutions amplifies national security by distributing the burdens of collective defence while imposing obligations for readiness, capability contributions, and policy alignment. When aligned with national strategy, these frameworks enhance both regional stability and global order (Rattray 2001).

Institutional Element and Its Connection to Key Military Components

The institutional element functions as the structural and normative backbone linking political authority, strategic intent, and operational capability. Its connections to political–military integration, doctrine and strategy, alliances and partnerships, and the defence industrial base ensure that military forces act legitimately, coherently, and effectively across the full spectrum of operations (Gray 2010; Krebs 2009).

Institutions create formal and informal channels that connect civilian leadership to military action, ensuring that armed forces operate under legitimate authority and in alignment with national objectives (Clausewitz 1976; Gray 2010). They codify doctrine and strategic guidance, standardise professional practice, and provide continuity across leadership transitions (Biddle 2004; Posen 1984; Murray 2011). Institutionalised alliances establish shared decision-making mechanisms, interoperable command structures, and collective defence obligations that strengthen deterrence and assurance while reducing friction in multinational operations (Art 2003b; Schelling 1966; Rattray 2001).

Importantly, institutions do not correspond to individual strategic uses of military power; rather, they constitute the enabling architecture through which these are generated, governed, and constrained. Institutional arrangements shape how military power is integrated with diplomacy, economic statecraft, and alliance management, ensuring that the application of force remains consistent with political objectives, legal obligations, and strategic risk tolerance across the competition continuum.

In aggregate, the institutional element transforms raw military potential into sustainable, credible, and strategically aligned power. By providing legitimacy, continuity, accountability, and adaptability, institutions enable armed forces to operate effectively from peacetime engagement through crisis and conflict, while preserving coherence with national policy and international obligations (Gray 2010; Kaldor 2012). Together, the material, human, organisational, technological, and institutional elements constitute the foundational inputs of military power. Yet these elements do not translate automatically into operational effectiveness. Their strategic value emerges only through specific configurations, arrangements, and practices that convert abstract capacity into usable capability. At this intermediate level, between

foundational elements and the strategic use of military power, the components of military power operate. Components represent the mechanisms through which elements are combined, balanced, and expressed in practice, shaping how armed forces are structured, commanded, sustained, integrated with allies, and aligned with political authority.

6.6. Components within Elements of the Military Instrument

Within the broader elements of the military instrument, force structure and design determine how military capabilities are organised and translated into operational capacity. While political authority, institutional frameworks, human capital, and technological resources form the foundations of military power, force structure represents the practical configuration through which those elements are integrated into deployable forces. Decisions about how units are organised, equipped, and balanced across domains shape the range of missions a military can perform and the strategic options available to political leaders. Force structure therefore links the abstract components of military power to the concrete capabilities through which states generate, apply, and sustain military force.

Force Structure and Design

Force structure physically embodies national strategy. It determines not only what a military can do, but how fast, how far, and at what cost. Designing a force requires balancing threat perceptions, geography, political objectives, alliance commitments, and available industrial and technological capacities. These choices are inherently strategic: once made, they constrain and enable military action for decades.

States typically gravitate toward several broad structural archetypes. Heavy mechanised forces are optimised for high-intensity, attrition-based warfare and territorial defence, prioritising firepower, protection, and endurance. Expeditionary and rapid-reaction forces emphasise global mobility, crisis response, and limited intervention, trading mass for speed and flexibility. Maritime and aerospace dominance forces focus on sea control, power projection, and air superiority, enabling influence across vast distances. Increasingly, many states adopt hybrid or multi-layered force structures that integrate conventional, asymmetric, cyber, and information capabilities to exploit adversaries' vulnerabilities across multiple domains.

Force design directly shapes strategic behaviour. A state organised around heavy, land-centric forces will struggle to project combat power globally, while a lightly equipped expeditionary force may lack the resilience and endurance required for prolonged high-intensity conflict (CSBA 2020; RAND 2020). Modern force design reflects this enduring trade-off and increasingly incorporates converging capabilities that reshape how armed forces generate, apply, and sustain power.

Autonomous systems and human-machine teaming have become central to contemporary and future force concepts. The U.S. Navy's Unmanned Campaign Framework (2021) and analyses from the Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC 2021) highlight how unmanned aerial swarms, robotic ground systems, and autonomous undersea vehicles expand sensing, persistence, and strike capacity while reducing operational risk. When integrated with human operators, these systems accelerate decision cycles and enable distributed lethality, allowing forces to operate in environments that are too dangerous, contested, or degraded for purely manned platforms (Bundy 2024; Kraska and Pedrozo 2022).

Precision-strike complexes, the fusion of long-range fires, advanced ISR, and real-time targeting networks, are increasingly shaping doctrine, deterrence, and campaign design. Deep-strike capabilities can neutralise logistics hubs, air defences, and command nodes early in a

conflict (CSBA 2020). French Institute of International Studies (IFRI) emphasises that states unable to field or counter such systems risk strategic paralysis before traditional manoeuvre forces can be effectively employed.

A2/AD represents one of the most consequential structural developments in contemporary force design. It is not merely a collection of weapons, but a coherent denial architecture intended to prevent, delay, or complicate adversary intervention within a defined theatre. In strategic terms, A2/AD is the material expression of denial-based strategy: rather than projecting power outward, it seeks to shape the operating environment inward, raising the cost, risk, and uncertainty of external penetration (Tangredi 2013; Montgomery 2014).

Anti-access refers to capabilities designed to prevent an adversary from entering a theatre of operations, typically through long-range precision strikes, maritime exclusion systems, IAMD, cyber disruption, and space denial capabilities (Krepinevich 2015; CSBA 2010). Area denial, by contrast, constrains manoeuvre freedom once entry occurs, using layered fires, anti-ship and anti-air systems, electronic warfare, unmanned platforms, and defensive depth to erode operational effectiveness (Erickson and Goldstein 2007; RAND 2020).

At its core, A2/AD is a systems-integration model. Its effectiveness does not come from any single platform, but from fusing C4ISR networks, long-range precision fires, distributed sensors, resilient communications, logistics interdiction capabilities, and IAMD into a unified operational architecture (CSBA 2023a). Over-the-horizon radars, space-based ISR, maritime domain awareness systems, cyber reconnaissance, and electronic surveillance feed targeting data into precision-strike complexes that can engage adversary naval forces, forward airbases, logistics hubs, and command nodes at extended ranges (RAND 2025). This integration compresses adversary decision cycles while expanding defensive reaction time, shifting initiative to the denial posture.

Logistics targeting forms a particularly decisive component of mature A2/AD systems. Rather than focusing solely on frontline combat units, denial architectures increasingly aim to disrupt sealift, airlift, prepositioned stocks, fuel distribution networks, and sustainment nodes. By threatening reinforcement pathways and sustainment corridors, A2/AD strategies convert geography into advantage and transform time into a defensive ally (Van Creveld 1977; Biddle 2004; Montgomery 2014). The objective is not necessarily decisive destruction, but strategic delay and attritional erosion sufficient to deter intervention or fracture coalition cohesion.

In this sense, A2/AD bridges force design and deterrence theory. Structurally, it reflects procurement choices in missile forces, sensor networks, industrial capacity, and doctrinal emphasis. Strategically, it reinforces deterrence by denial by signalling that intervention will be slow, costly, and operationally uncertain (Freedman 2004; Gray 2015). Where credible, A2/AD architectures alter adversary calculations before conflict begins, shaping strategic behaviour without requiring immediate force employment.

However, A2/AD systems are not invulnerable. Their reliance on networked sensors, communications links, and precision targeting exposes them to cyber disruption, electronic warfare, space interference, and distributed manoeuvre designed to overwhelm or fragment integrated defences (Krepinevich 2015; CSBA 2023b; RAND 2025). Consequently, contemporary counter-A2/AD concepts emphasise dispersion, resilience, long-range strike, deception, and multidomain manoeuvre, reflected in doctrines such as Joint Concept for Access and Manoeuvre in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) and Multidomain Operations.

Ultimately, A2/AD is best understood not as a defensive posture alone, but as a structural manifestation of modern competition. It reflects the convergence of precision technologies,

sensor fusion, and strategic geography into an architecture designed to contest access and shape escalation dynamics (Tangredi 2013; Gray 2015). In doing so, it exemplifies how force structure, doctrine, technology, and deterrence logic intersect within the broader military instrument of power.

Distributed maritime and air operations reflect a growing recognition that large, centralised platforms are increasingly vulnerable in contested environments. Concepts such as Distributed Maritime Operations and distributed airpower, articulated in U.S. Navy doctrine (2021) and CIMSEC (2021) analyses, advocate dispersing combat power across numerous smaller, networked units. This approach leverages unmanned systems, modular payloads, and resilient command-and-control architectures to sustain offensive capability even when individual nodes are degraded or destroyed.

Cyber and electronic warfare integration has become indispensable to modern force design. Contemporary doctrine, including the U.S. Army's Cyber-Electromagnetic Activities framework (Soesanto 2019), and assessments by Nakasone and Lewis (2017), argue that cyber and EW are no longer auxiliary enablers but core operational tools. NATO-affiliated CCDCOE analyses stress that integrated cyber-EW can blind sensors, corrupt targeting data, and disrupt logistics software before kinetic operations begin, generating decisive advantages in tempo, deception, and cognitive disruption.

Resilient networks in contested environments form the connective tissue of these force structures. RAND studies (2020, 2025) on distributed operations and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's program (DARPA 2022) emphasise the necessity of mesh networks, redundant pathways, satellite alternatives, and anti-jamming technologies. Without resilient connectivity, distributed forces fragment, autonomous systems lose coordination, and precision-strike complexes fail to deliver timely effects.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that force structure is not merely the mechanical output of procurement cycles or doctrinal preference. It is a dynamic architecture that shapes strategic thinking as much as it is shaped by it. Once adopted, whether centred on autonomy, precision fires, resilient networks, or distributed operations, force design influences doctrine, industrial policy, alliance interoperability, and political decisions about where and how a state can credibly project power. In this sense, force structure functions as a feedback mechanism: it crystallises strategic choices in material form, and those material forms in turn shape the range of strategies available to the state.

Doctrine and Operational Concepts

Even the most advanced weapons, resilient industrial bases, or expansive logistics networks remain strategically inert without the intellectual frameworks that guide their employment. Doctrine and operational concepts perform this critical bridging function. Doctrine provides the overarching worldview through which a military interprets war and organises for it, while operational concepts translate that worldview into practical methods of applying force at the campaign and theatre levels. Together, they convert material and human potential into operational and strategic effectiveness.

Doctrine is more than a compilation of procedures or tactical manuals. It represents an institutionalised strategic worldview, synthesising historical experience, political objectives, technological possibilities, and assessments of future threats into a coherent conception of how a military prepares for and conducts war. Effective doctrine provides a shared cognitive framework under conditions of ambiguity and stress; guides force employment across manoeuvre, fires, logistics, information, and command and control; enables joint and combined

operations across domains; and shapes long-term capability development, procurement, and organisational design.

Doctrine evolves continuously in response to geopolitical change, technological innovation, and lessons drawn from conflict and competition. Historical examples illustrate this adaptive function clearly. AirLand Battle in the 1980s integrated deep fires, rapid manoeuvre, and real-time surveillance to counter massed Warsaw Pact formations. Network-Centric Warfare in the 1990s and early 2000s emphasised information dominance, precision strike, and distributed lethality. Counterinsurgency doctrine in the 2000s reframed the purpose of force around population security and political stabilisation. In each case, doctrine provided a coherent way of thinking about problems before they were fully encountered.

Doctrine, however, is insufficient without an organisational culture that permits innovation. As Rosen (1991) demonstrates, armed forces innovate not simply because new technologies emerge, but because internal social and institutional dynamics allow change. Effective military organisations cultivate experimentation through war-gaming and field trials, decentralised command philosophies such as mission command, robust lessons-learned systems, and cross-domain collaboration that breaks down service silos. Without these conditions, doctrine stagnates regardless of material strength.

History offers stark illustrations of the costs of doctrinal rigidity. France before 1940 possessed capable officers, modern tanks, and substantial industrial resources, yet clung to a defensive, attritional mindset shaped by World War I. Mechanised forces were dispersed, innovation discouraged, and junior leaders denied initiative. As a result, France failed to grasp the operational implications of German combined-arms manoeuvre warfare, allowing a materially inferior force to achieve a rapid strategic breakthrough.

Similar patterns appeared in several Arab armed forces in the late twentieth century. Rigid hierarchies, political oversight of command, and fear of independent initiative inhibited realistic training and decentralised execution. Although many of these forces fielded advanced weaponry, their organisational cultures prevented effective joint operations and adaptation. Consequently, they underperformed in conflicts ranging from the Arab–Israeli wars to the Iran–Iraq War and the Gulf War, despite at times enjoying numerical or technological advantages.

Where doctrine provides the intellectual foundation, operational concepts articulate how a military intends to fight under specific strategic conditions. They bridge doctrine’s abstract logic with tactical execution by offering frameworks for campaign design, joint manoeuvre, and multidomain integration. Operational concepts guide future force development, help commanders conceptualise how to sequence actions and link tactical engagements to strategic objectives, and provide a testing ground for innovation before ideas are fully institutionalised.

Examples include Air–Sea Battle and its successor, the Joint Concept for Access and Manoeuvre in the Global Commons, designed to counter A2/AD systems; Multidomain Operations, which seeks to dis-integrate adversary systems through synchronised effects across domains; China’s Integrated Joint Operations, emphasising unified command and multidomain coordination; and Russia’s New Generation Warfare, which blends information, cyber, unconventional forces, and conventional fires to shape the battlespace before large-scale combat.

Collectively, doctrine and operational concepts ensure that military power is not merely possessed but intelligently employed. They shape how forces think, how campaigns are designed, and how emerging technologies are incorporated into coherent strategies, making them indispensable to translating foundational elements into effective military capability.

Jointness and Interoperability

Modern warfare is inherently joint and, in coalition contexts, inherently combined (multinational). Integrating land, air, maritime, space, and cyber capabilities into a unified operational framework provides a decisive advantage, enabling armed forces to translate technological sophistication and numerical strength into coherent strategic effects (Biddle 2004; Van Creveld 1977). Jointness, defined as the deliberate integration of multiple services within a single national military, requires far more than co-locating forces. It demands systemic alignment across command structures, doctrine, training, and enabling technologies (Cohen and Gooch 1990; Kofman and Rojansky 2015).

Effective joint operations rest on several interdependent requirements. Shared command-and-control architectures are essential to synchronise operations across domains and echelons, allowing real-time coordination among land, air, maritime, space, and cyber forces (Mattis 2018). Common doctrines and planning processes provide a unified conceptual approach to employing force, ensuring different services operate from a shared understanding of objectives, sequencing, and risk. Historical campaigns such as the 1991 Gulf War demonstrated how integrated manoeuvre, airpower, and logistics, guided by common planning frameworks, can generate decisive operational effects.

Interoperable platforms and data systems are equally critical. Standardised communications protocols, shared intelligence and ISR feeds, and compatible weapons and targeting networks allow distributed forces to operate cohesively rather than as parallel, loosely coordinated entities (Allison 2018). Without such technical interoperability, joint forces struggle to exploit speed, precision, and simultaneity, even when individual components are highly capable. Cross-domain training and exercises further reinforce jointness by habituating forces to operate together in complex environments, reducing friction and improving adaptability under stress (Rosen 1991; Kolditz 2007).

When effectively integrated, joint forces achieve higher operational tempo, greater survivability, and more efficient decision-making, converting multidomain complexity into strategic advantage (Biddle 2004; Van Creveld 1991). Contemporary concepts such as U.S. Multidomain Operations reflect this logic, emphasising the synchronised employment of cyber, space, and conventional fires to create windows of advantage, disrupt adversary systems, and complicate decision-making across levels of war (CSBA 2023b).

Interoperability extends the logic of jointness beyond the national level, magnifying military power in alliance and coalition contexts. Within institutions such as NATO, interoperability encompasses common standards for communications and data-sharing that enable seamless intelligence, targeting, and logistics coordination across multinational units. Harmonised operational procedures, including rules of engagement, force protection measures, and planning processes, reduce friction and uncertainty during coalition operations (Lambeth 2000). Compatible logistics and sustainment systems allow allies to share supplies, maintenance capabilities, and prepositioned stockpiles, enhancing endurance and responsiveness under combat conditions (Biddle 2004).

Equally important are political and command mechanisms that structure multinational authority and responsibility. Combined joint task forces, integrated command arrangements, and standing alliance headquarters institutionalise cooperation and clarify decision-making in crisis and conflict (Snider 2008b). These mechanisms ensure that interoperability is not improvised under pressure but embedded in peacetime governance, planning, and training.

Military experience consistently shows that coalitions with high interoperability achieve disproportionate effects relative to their individual national capacities. The 1991 Gulf War and NATO operations in Afghanistan show how integrated multinational forces, supported by common doctrine, communications, and training, can leverage complementary strengths while minimising redundancy. By contrast, coalitions lacking interoperability often suffer from duplication of effort, delayed decision-making, and exploitable vulnerabilities, allowing adversaries to offset material disadvantages through speed, deception, or asymmetric action (Record 1993; Kofman and Rojansky 2015).

Ultimately, jointness and interoperability reflect more than technical integration. They embody institutional trust, shared doctrinal understanding, and organisational willingness to subordinate parochial service or national interests to pursue strategic coherence. Without these human and institutional dimensions, even technologically advanced forces may fail to realise their full combat potential (Rosen 1991; Kolditz 2007). In this sense, jointness and interoperability are both operational and cultural achievements that require sustained investment in education, training, and cross-service and multinational collaboration.

Readiness and Sustainability, the Capacity to Fight and Endure

Military power is not static; it fluctuates according to readiness levels, training cycles, equipment condition, logistical depth, and political constraints (Biddle 2004; Van Creveld 1977). Forces that appear formidable on paper may prove operationally ineffective if they lack trained personnel, serviceable equipment, or the capacity to sustain operations under stress. Readiness and sustainability accordingly constitute a core component through which military elements are converted into usable and enduring combat power.

Readiness refers to the ability of military forces to execute assigned missions at a given point in time. It operates across strategic, operational, and tactical levels and reflects the immediate usability of force structure and doctrine. Personnel availability is central: the proportion of trained, deployable service members relative to authorised strength directly shapes operational flexibility, cohesion, and unit effectiveness. Attrition, illness, or prolonged deployment cycles can rapidly degrade readiness even in otherwise well-equipped forces (Kohn 2009).

Equipment operability is equally decisive. The percentage of platforms and systems that are fully functional determines whether forces can train realistically, deploy rapidly, and fight effectively. In technologically intensive domains, air, naval, and mechanised land warfare, maintenance shortfalls can cascade across units, sharply reducing combat availability and operational tempo (McGrath 2005; Betts 1995). Training currency completes the readiness triad. The recency, realism, and relevance of individual and collective training, particularly in joint and coalition settings, determine whether forces can translate doctrine into performance under complex, multidomain conditions (Rosen 1991; Cohen and Gooch 1990).

Logistical posture underpins all dimensions of readiness. Stockpiles of fuel, ammunition, spare parts, and sustainment infrastructure enable rapid mobilisation and early combat effectiveness. Without them, readiness collapses almost immediately, regardless of personnel quality or platform sophistication (Van Creveld 1977; Biddle 2004). High readiness enhances deterrence credibility and crisis stability by signalling that a state can respond decisively to threats (Betts 1995). Conversely, low readiness invites opportunism and increases the risk of rapid operational failure once conflict begins. Historical examples range from the overstretched German Wehrmacht in 1944–45, whose depleted manpower and logistics constrained operations despite advanced equipment, to early U.S. forces in Vietnam, where inadequate training and sustainment for counterinsurgency limited effectiveness (Citino 2007; Gordon and Trainor 1995).

Sustainability extends readiness across time. It is the capacity to maintain military operations over prolonged periods and under conditions of attrition, disruption, and uncertainty. Sustainment encompasses logistics and supply chains, repair and maintenance cycles, and strategic mobility assets. Modern conflicts repeatedly demonstrate that disruptions in fuel, ammunition, or spare parts can degrade even technologically superior forces, as seen in U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and in contemporary high-intensity warfare (Gordon and Trainor 1995; McGrath 2005).

Repair and maintenance capacity directly shapes operational tempo. The ability to restore damaged platforms, regenerate units, and sustain availability under combat conditions determines whether forces can maintain initiative or are forced into operational pause (Citino 2007; McKitterick 2023). Strategic and operational mobility, airlift, sealift, rail, and intra-theatre transport further condition sustainment. Forces lacking lift and transport depth may be unable to reinforce, reposition, or exploit success, sharply constraining strategic options (Biddle 2004; CSBA 2023b).

The ongoing Russo–Ukrainian war illustrates how sustainment shapes outcomes beyond the tactical level. High rates of ammunition expenditure, equipment attrition, and repair bottlenecks influence not only battlefield decisions but broader strategic trajectories, including the capacity to hold ground, conduct offensives, or absorb losses over time (Galeotti 2022; McKitterick 2023). Historical parallels, such as Germany’s 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, underscore how overstretched logistics and inadequate transport infrastructure can undermine even initially successful campaigns (Glaser 1997). Sustainability also encompasses societal endurance. Prolonged or high-intensity conflict requires the mobilisation of political will, economic resources, and public support, factors that collectively define a state’s capacity to fight and endure strategically (Reiter and Stam 2002; Jentleson 2013). Economic sustainability depends on defence industrial capacity, including the ability to produce, repair, and replenish forces under wartime conditions, as well as fiscal flexibility to absorb the costs of prolonged operations (Biddle 2004; McGrath 2005; Betts 1995).

Political sustainability reflects the durability of government commitment under pressure. Strategic endurance requires resilience against domestic opposition, coalition friction, and international constraints, as well as institutional adaptability to adjust objectives and the use of force as conditions evolve (Rosen 1991; Kofman and Rojansky 2015). Social sustainability, in turn, concerns public support and societal cohesion. Democracies often benefit from legitimacy and alliance cohesion but may face sharper constraints from public opinion and political contestation, while autocracies can mobilise rapidly but risk brittleness if campaigns stall or legitimacy erodes (Reiter and Stam 2002; Jentleson 2013; Biddle and Friedman 2021).

Historical experience underscores these limits. Imperial Germany in World War I struggled under economic blockade and domestic unrest, while the Soviet Union’s war in Afghanistan imposed enduring social and political strain despite sustained military investment (Hirshman 1995; McGrath 2005). Contemporary conflicts reaffirm that morale, industrial resilience, and political cohesion remain decisive determinants of endurance alongside battlefield performance (Galeotti 2022; McKitterick 2023).

Taken together, readiness and sustainability link immediate military usability to long-term strategic endurance. They integrate material capacity, human skill, organisational competence, technological reliability, and institutional resilience into a coherent ability to fight, absorb attrition, and persist over time. In modern warfare, victory rarely depends on initial force employment alone; it hinges on the capacity to sustain effective action under pressure while preserving legitimacy, cohesion, and strategic choice.

Training and Professional Military Education

The value of the military instrument is not measured solely by its size, technological sophistication, or material inventory, but by the preparedness, skill, and adaptability of the personnel who employ it. Training and PME are central to transforming material resources, organisational structures, and doctrinal concepts into effective military performance. They determine whether forces can act decisively under stress, integrate across domains, and adapt to uncertainty and surprise.

At the most immediate level, training sustains troop readiness and mobilisation capacity. Personnel readiness encompasses not only numerical availability but also physical fitness, psychological resilience, and the ability to transition rapidly from peacetime posture to operational employment. High mobilisation rates allow forces to surge in response to crises, sustain rotational deployments, and reinforce allies without delay. This capacity depends on institutionalised readiness assessments, pre-positioned equipment, and continuous training cycles that keep units prepared for deployment rather than merely present on organisational charts.

Operational training and exercises provide the primary means by which forces develop tactical proficiency and operational cohesion. Scenario-based exercises, live-fire training, and joint or combined drills enable units to rehearse doctrine under realistic conditions, refine command-and-control relationships, and internalise MDO procedures. Large-scale exercises such as NATO's Trident Juncture are particularly valuable because they stress-test interoperability, logistics, and sustainment while exposing friction points that are often invisible in peacetime planning. Such exercises function not only as preparation for combat but also as instruments of learning, adaptation, and deterrence signalling (Gray 2015).

Leader development is a critical bridge between training and operational effectiveness. Military organisations rely on leaders at all levels to translate plans into action, make decisions under uncertainty, and sustain cohesion under pressure. Leadership training thus emphasises judgment, risk assessment, ethical reasoning, and command across complex and degraded environments. Adaptive leaders enable decentralised execution, preserve initiative, and maintain morale even when communications fail or situations diverge from expectations. Without effective leadership development, the benefits of advanced technology and detailed planning are often negated in practice (Freedman 2013).

PME extends training beyond immediate operational proficiency to the strategic and institutional level. PME institutions, including staff colleges and war colleges, provide officers and senior non-commissioned leaders with the intellectual foundations of strategy, operational art, joint and interagency coordination, and civil-military relations. Through historical experience, doctrinal debates, and contemporary strategic challenges, PME cultivates critical thinking capability and long-term adaptation. These institutions play a key role in integrating lessons from past conflicts, emerging technologies, and evolving geopolitical contexts into coherent approaches to force development and employment (Murray 2011; Gray 1999).

Discipline and ethical frameworks underpin all aspects of training and education. Military effectiveness depends not only on competence but on legitimacy, cohesion, and trust, both within the force and between the military and the societies it serves. Ethical training reinforces compliance with international law, the law of armed conflict, and rules of engagement, ensuring that the use of force remains aligned with political objectives and normative constraints. Discipline sustains resilience under stress, reduces the risk of misconduct, and preserves the moral authority upon which long-term operational success often depends (Freedman 2013).

Together, training and PME determine whether military forces can respond rapidly, adapt to unforeseen conditions, and maintain cohesion amid friction, loss, and uncertainty. They integrate the human, organisational, technological, and institutional elements of military power into a living capability for action. Without sustained investment in training and PME, even well-equipped and technologically advanced forces risk underperforming in complex operating environments. With it, armed forces gain not only tactical proficiency but the intellectual and moral foundations needed to be effective across the full spectrum of competition and conflict.

Logistics, Sustainment, and Mobility

Logistics is often described as the lifeblood of military power because it translates abstract capability into sustained operational presence and endurance. While force structure, doctrine, and training determine how armed forces intend to fight, logistics and mobility determine whether they can fight at all, and whether they can continue fighting once operations begin. The ability to move, supply, repair, and protect forces across time and space therefore constitutes a foundational component of military effectiveness and a decisive constraint on strategy (Van Creveld 1977; Biddle 2004).

At its core, logistics links the material element of military power to operational endurance. Modern military operations depend on complex supply chains and transportation networks that move fuel, ammunition, spare parts, food, and personnel from industrial bases to forward-deployed units. These networks span land, sea, air, rail, and increasingly digital logistics-management systems. Their effectiveness depends not only on throughput but on resilience. Redundancy, dispersal, and adaptability are essential to mitigate disruption from adversary interdiction, cyberattacks, infrastructure degradation, or environmental hazards (RAND 2025). As contemporary conflicts show, even brief supply interruptions can halt manoeuvre, degrade readiness, and force operational pauses.

Fuel, ammunition, and maintenance systems are especially critical in high-intensity, technologically sophisticated warfare. Modern platforms consume fuel and munitions at extraordinary rates, while their complexity demands continuous maintenance and specialised repair infrastructure. Sustainment therefore hinges on stockpiles, forward repair facilities, mobile maintenance units, and prepositioned equipment that let forces regenerate combat power without withdrawing from the theatre (Murray 2011; Biddle 2004). Attrition in logistics and maintenance capacity often proves more decisive than losses inflicted directly on combat units, as degraded sustainment erodes operational tempo and constrains strategic choice long before forces are physically destroyed.

Historical experience underscores the strategic centrality of logistics. In the industrial wars of the twentieth century, victory often depended less on tactical brilliance than on the ability to mobilise, transport, and sustain forces at scale. During the Second World War, the Allied powers prevailed not merely through battlefield performance but through unmatched industrial output, sealift capacity, fuel distribution networks, and forward logistics infrastructure that enabled continuous operations across multiple theatres. By contrast, Germany's repeated operational successes were undermined by inadequate logistics, limited fuel supplies, and overstretched transportation systems, culminating in strategic exhaustion once attrition outpaced replenishment. These patterns show that logistical depth and industrial resilience decisively enable long-term military effectiveness.

Medical and support units form another indispensable pillar of sustainment. Combat effectiveness depends not only on weapons and supplies but on the physical and psychological resilience of personnel. Medical evacuation systems, field hospitals, trauma care, and combat stress mitigation reduce non-battle attrition, preserve morale, and sustain unit cohesion.

Engineering units, infrastructure repair teams, and field support elements similarly enable mobility, survivability, and continuity of operations. Together, these capabilities ensure that losses do not automatically translate into operational collapse and that forces can absorb shock while maintaining effectiveness.

Mobility connects logistics directly to strategy. Strategic mobility, the capacity to deploy forces rapidly across theatres, depends on airlift, sealift, rail networks, port access, and prepositioned stockpiles. States with robust mobility capabilities can respond quickly to crises, reinforce allies, and signal resolve without relying solely on permanent forward deployments. This flexibility is central to deterrence, escalation management, and alliance assurance, as it lets states adjust posture dynamically rather than committing irrevocably to a static presence. Conversely, limited mobility constrains strategic options, tying military power to geography and increasing reliance on fixed bases or delayed responses.

Cold War and post-Cold War conflicts further demonstrate how mobility shapes strategic reach. The rapid deployment and sustainment of coalition forces during the 1991 Gulf War illustrated how airlift, sealift, and prepositioned equipment could generate overwhelming combat power far from national territory. States lacking comparable mobility, even when fielding capable ground forces, remain largely confined to regional operations. Mobility thus functions as a gatekeeper of strategic relevance in a global security environment.

In contemporary conflict, logistics and sustainment are no longer rear-area functions insulated from attack. Adversaries increasingly target supply chains, transportation nodes, fuel depots, and maintenance facilities through long-range fires, drones, cyber operations, and information campaigns. The Russo-Ukrainian war highlights how ammunition expenditure rates, repair capacity, fuel distribution, and industrial replenishment shape not only tactical outcomes but strategic timelines, determining whether forces can hold ground, exploit success, or endure prolonged attrition. As a result, modern military concepts emphasise protected logistics, distributed sustainment, and contested mobility, recognising that sustaining operations under attack is as critical as initiating them.

Taken together, logistics, sustainment, and mobility determine whether military power can be projected over distance, maintained under attritional pressure, and scaled to meet evolving operational demands. They bind the material, organisational, technological, and institutional elements of military power into a functioning whole. Without robust logistics and mobility, readiness deteriorates, training cannot be sustained, joint operations fragment, and strategic objectives become unattainable. With them, armed forces gain not only endurance but freedom of action, the capacity to choose when, where, and how force is employed over time.

Defence Industrial Base and Technology

The defence industrial base underpins long-term military effectiveness by linking technological innovation, production capacity, and sustainment to strategic power projection. While force structure and doctrine shape how armed forces intend to fight, the industrial base determines whether those intentions can be realised, sustained, and adapted over time. In modern warfare, military advantage comes not only from initial force deployment but from the continuous ability to design, produce, repair, modernise, and replenish capabilities under conditions of competition, disruption, and attrition.

At its core, the defence industrial base encompasses defence industries and production capacity across both state-owned and private sectors. These industries produce combat platforms, munitions, sensors, communications systems, and sustainment infrastructure while also maintaining and upgrading existing forces. Industrial capacity therefore determines not only the

scale of force a state can field but its resilience in prolonged operations. Conflicts characterised by high rates of ammunition expenditure, platform attrition, and technological adaptation, such as those observed in contemporary high-intensity warfare, demonstrate that industrial depth and surge capacity often matter more than peacetime inventories (Mahnken 2010). States that cannot replenish losses or adapt production lines quickly risk strategic exhaustion, regardless of initial battlefield success.

Research and development institutions form the forward edge of the defence industrial base. Military advantage increasingly depends on sustained innovation in advanced materials, AI, autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, space technologies, and precision-guided munitions. These institutions, national laboratories, defence research agencies, university-affiliated centres, and corporate R&D divisions translate scientific discovery into military applications. Their importance lies not only in producing breakthrough technologies but in sustaining iterative improvement, allowing armed forces to adapt faster than adversaries as operational conditions evolve. In this sense, R&D capacity shapes the future battlespace before conflict begins, determining which actors enter war with technological momentum and which are forced into reactive adaptation.

Innovation ecosystems and dual-use technologies have become especially central to modern military power. Many of the most consequential military technologies now originate in civilian sectors, including artificial intelligence, cloud computing, satellite constellations, robotics, and advanced manufacturing. Effective civil–military integration enables armed forces to leverage commercial innovation cycles, shorten development timelines, and scale capabilities more rapidly than traditional procurement models allow. States that successfully integrate dual-use technologies gain not only cost and speed advantages but also adaptability, as commercial ecosystems can reconfigure production and software far more quickly than closed military systems (Mahnken 2010). Conversely, armed forces isolated from civilian innovation risk technological stagnation and slower adaptation to emerging threats.

Advanced platforms and systems represent the material expression of industrial and technological capacity. Contemporary military power is increasingly defined by the ability to develop, produce, and integrate systems such as hypersonic weapons, autonomous and semi-autonomous platforms, cyber capabilities, electronic warfare tools, and space-based ISR and communications assets. These systems extend operational reach, compress decision timelines, enhance precision, and enable cross-domain integration. Their strategic value lies not only in their individual performance but in their ability to function as part of interconnected system-of-systems architectures, linking sensors, shooters, command-and-control, and sustainment across domains (Gray 2015).

Crucially, the defence industrial base is not a static reservoir of capability but a dynamic instrument of competition. Industrial agility, the ability to shift production priorities, retool manufacturing lines, secure supply chains, and protect intellectual property, has become a core determinant of strategic resilience. Supply-chain vulnerabilities, dependence on critical minerals, semiconductor fabrication bottlenecks, and exposure to cyber espionage or sabotage introduce new strategic risks that directly affect military readiness and endurance. As a result, industrial policy, export controls, allied co-production, and technology protection have become integral components of national defence strategy rather than peripheral economic concerns.

The battlefield implications of these dynamics are profound. Forces supported by agile, technologically advanced industrial bases can absorb attrition, adapt tactics, and introduce new capabilities during conflict, thereby shaping not only tactical engagements but the overall trajectory of war. By contrast, armed forces are reliant on brittle supply chains or slow

innovation cycles face declining effectiveness as adversaries learn, adapt, and impose costs. In this sense, the defence industrial base functions as a temporal force multiplier: it determines not only how wars are fought, but how long they can be sustained and on what terms they conclude. Together, industrial capacity, technological innovation, and production resilience shape a state's sustained competitive advantage. It influences warfighting effectiveness, deterrence credibility, alliance interoperability, and the ability to operate in contested, multidomain environments over time. In an era defined by rapid technological change and protracted strategic competition, the defence industrial base is not merely a supporting element of military power; it is a decisive foundation.

Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance

As a core component of the military instrument, C4ISR constitutes the information architecture through which modern armed forces generate situational awareness, decision superiority, and operational coherence. While platforms and weapons deliver physical effects, C4ISR determines what is seen, how it is understood, how rapidly decisions are made, and how effectively military action is synchronised across domains and levels of command. In contemporary warfare, C4ISR superiority often proves more decisive than numerical strength or firepower alone because it governs tempo, precision, and adaptability.

At its foundation, C4ISR enables continuous situational awareness. Intelligence collection systems, including satellites, radar networks, signals intelligence platforms, cyber reconnaissance tools, unmanned systems, and open-source intelligence, produce persistent data on adversary forces, terrain, activity patterns, and intent. Advanced processing architectures, increasingly supported by AI and machine learning, fuse these inputs into actionable intelligence. The value of C4ISR lies not merely in collection but in fusion, validation, and the rapid translation of information into operational understanding.

Effective command and control integrate this knowledge into decision-making structures. Secure and resilient communications networks connect political authorities, operational headquarters, and tactical units, allowing intent, orders, and feedback to flow across the force. Modern C2 systems balance centralised direction with decentralised execution, enabling adaptability in complex and rapidly changing environments. This balance is especially critical in MDOs, where land, maritime, air, cyber, space, and electromagnetic activities must be synchronised to achieve cumulative strategic effects.

Historical experience repeatedly demonstrates the decisive role of C4ISR in operational success. During the 1991 Gulf War, coalition forces leveraged intelligence and surveillance superiority to disrupt Iraqi command and control, isolate fielded forces, and achieve rapid operational dominance. More recently, the war in Ukraine has highlighted both the transformative power and the vulnerability of networked information architectures, as persistent surveillance, precision targeting, and real-time communication coexist with electronic warfare, cyber disruption, and attacks on communications infrastructure.

In future operating environments, particularly across large and contested theatres such as the Indo-Pacific, C4ISR will become even more central. Vast distances, dispersed forces, and A2/AD systems place a premium on long-range sensing, resilient communications, and distributed command architectures. Satellite constellations, over-the-horizon radar, maritime and undersea sensing, and allied information sharing will be essential to maintain awareness, protect critical lines of communication, and coordinate joint and multinational forces. The degradation or loss of these systems can generate cascading operational and strategic consequences.

Because of this centrality, C4ISR has become a primary domain of strategic competition. Adversaries actively seek to disrupt, deceive, or degrade information systems through cyber operations, electronic warfare, anti-satellite capabilities, and information manipulation. Asymmetries in sensing, processing, and decision cycles can generate disproportionate advantages, shaping escalation dynamics and constraining adversary options. Resilience is thus a defining requirement. Redundancy, dispersion, encryption, cyber defence, and the ability to operate under degraded or denied conditions are essential for sustaining coordination and effectiveness. Distributed architectures and mission command philosophies help ensure that forces retain situational awareness and control even when primary systems are disrupted.

C4ISR thus transforms military organisations from collections of platforms and personnel into coherent, adaptive systems capable of sustained operations across domains and levels of conflict. Where information architectures are robust and resilient, military power can be applied with precision, speed, and control. Where they are fragmented or contested, even materially superior forces risk paralysis, miscalculation, and strategic failure.

Conclusion

Modern military power is best understood as an interconnected system in which material, organisational, human, technological, and institutional elements interact continuously to produce an effective force. Material capabilities, platforms, munitions, sensors, infrastructure, and logistics provide the physical means through which force can be generated, sustained, and applied. Yet these assets gain strategic meaning only when embedded within organisational structures that coordinate action, integrate joint and combined functions, and enable coherent command and control across domains and levels of war. Without such structures, even technologically advanced military forces remain fragmented, slow to adapt, or strategically ineffective.

At the centre of this system stand human factors. Skilled personnel, rigorous training, PME, and adaptive leadership cultures translate doctrine, technology, and organisational design into operational performance. Human capital determines how effectively armed forces learn, innovate, endure attrition, and exercise judgment under uncertainty. It is through the decisions and actions of people, commanders, staffs, operators, engineers, and logisticians that military power ultimately adapts to friction, complexity, and the moral demands of warfare.

Technological innovation further reshapes this ecosystem by expanding the tempo, reach, and precision of military operations. Precision-strike complexes, autonomous platforms, AI-enabled decision support, cyber capabilities, and resilient space architectures increasingly define the conditions under which modern forces compete and fight. Yet technological advantage is neither automatic nor self-sustaining. It depends fundamentally on robust institutional foundations: legal frameworks governing the use of force, accountable civil-military relations, effective strategic planning institutions, transparent procurement systems, and sustainable defence budgeting processes.

Institutions also extend military power beyond national borders. Alliances, partnerships, and treaty regimes amplify capability through shared intelligence, interoperability, collective defence arrangements, and strategic depth that no single state could generate independently. When effectively governed, these arrangements multiply deterrence credibility and distribute operational burdens across coalitions.

Taken together, the material, human, organisational, technological, and institutional elements form the enabling architecture of military power. They do not correspond directly to specific strategic uses of military power such as defence, deterrence, compellence, offence, posturing,

and miscellaneous. Rather, they constitute the foundational system from which these strategic uses emerge. Strategic effectiveness accordingly depends not on excellence in any single dimension but on the alignment and integration of all five elements.

States that successfully harmonise these elements are better positioned to adapt to evolving threats, sustain long-term competition, manage escalation, and endure protracted conflict. Those that fail risk possessing impressive forces that nevertheless struggle to translate potential into strategic effect. With this enabling architecture established, the analysis can now turn to the strategic use of military power in practice across the full spectrum of international competition and conflict.

7. MILITARY POWER IN A MULTIDOMAIN ERA

The evolving strategic environment is characterised by increasing simultaneity, interconnectedness, and persistence of competition across multiple operational domains. Military power is no longer exercised primarily through sequential campaigns in geographically bounded theatres. Instead, it is generated by integrating land, maritime, air, space, cyber, electromagnetic, and cognitive–informational dimensions of conflict. This transformation reflects structural changes in technology, global interdependence, and strategic competition, in which armed forces' effectiveness depends less on dominance in any single domain and more on the capacity to orchestrate effects across domains coherently and adaptively (Freedman 2017).

MDOs refer primarily to the operational and doctrinal integration of military capabilities across domains during conflict, while multidomain competition describes the broader strategic environment in which states employ these capabilities continuously across the competition continuum.

The shift toward MDOs therefore represents both continuity and evolution. Throughout history, strategic effectiveness has depended on integration, from early combined-arms and logistical coordination to industrial-era synchronisation of firepower and mobilisation, and Cold War integration of nuclear, conventional, and alliance-based deterrence. Contemporary multidomain competition extends these long-standing patterns by accelerating the tempo of interaction, expanding the range of relevant domains, and elevating the importance of information, perception, and decision-making (Strachan 2013).

Multidomain warfare is thus not simply a doctrinal or technological innovation. It reflects a broader systemic transformation, like military power. Rather than focusing exclusively on defeating fielded forces, states increasingly seek to disrupt adversary systems, including decision-making processes, information architecture, economic resilience, and political cohesion. The objective shifts from territorial conquest alone toward shaping adversary behaviour across the competition continuum, from persistent rivalry to high-intensity conflict (Hoffman 2018; Mazarr 2015).

This chapter examines the strategic implications of this transformation. It first outlines the logic of multidomain competition as an extension of historical patterns of integration and systemic warfare. It then analyses the interdependence of operational domains, the centrality of cognition and decision superiority, and the institutional and organisational adaptations required to sustain effectiveness. Finally, it explores the risks, vulnerabilities, and escalation dynamics associated with increasingly interconnected and technologically dense military systems.

7.1. The Strategic Logic of Multidomain Competition

At its core, the concept of MDOs reflects the recognition that contemporary conflict unfolds as a continuous and interactive process across domains and levels of competition. Rather than separating war and peace, modern rivalry involves persistent shaping activities designed to influence adversary perceptions, constrain strategic options, and generate advantages without necessarily escalating to open conflict. This logic aligns with recent scholarship emphasising the centrality of competition short of war and the importance of shaping the strategic environment through integrated military and non-military tools (Mazarr 2015; Brands and Gaddis 2021).

Multidomain competition emphasises simultaneity and convergence. Effects generated in one domain increasingly produce cascading consequences in others. Cyber operations may degrade command and control networks, space-based sensing may shape maritime manoeuvre, and information campaigns may alter political legitimacy and alliance cohesion. Strategic advantage emerges from the ability to synchronise these effects in ways that overwhelm adversary decision-making and create persistent dilemmas (Clarke and Knake 2020).

This approach reflects a shift from platform-centric to system-centric warfare. Traditional models of military power emphasised the performance of individual capabilities, such as tanks, aircraft, ships, or missiles. Contemporary competition focuses instead on interconnected architecture linking sensors, decision-makers, and strike capabilities. In this context, information superiority and decision advantage often prove more decisive than quantitative force structure alone (Biddle 2004; Kania 2019).

The growing importance of tempo further shapes this environment. Advances in communications, AI, and automation compress decision cycles, creating incentives for rapid action and preemption. States increasingly seek to observe, orient, decide, and act faster than adversaries, thereby shaping operational conditions and constraining adversary responses. However, compressed timelines also increase uncertainty and escalation risk, reinforcing the importance of resilient command systems and disciplined strategic signalling (Acton 2018; Horowitz 2010).

The systemic nature of multidomain competition also highlights the centrality of resilience and endurance. Because domains are interdependent, disruption in one can generate cascading effects across military and societal systems. Cyber-attacks on logistics or critical infrastructure, for example, may degrade operational mobility, while attacks on space-based capabilities may reduce situational awareness and precision. Consequently, modern effectiveness depends not only on offensive capability but also on the capacity to absorb shocks, recover, and sustain operations under contested conditions (Nye 2017; Coker 2013).

Viewed in historical perspective, these developments represent an amplification of longstanding trends toward integration, coordination, and systemic competition. The scale and speed of interaction have increased, but the underlying logic remains consistent: strategic effectiveness arises from the coherent organisation of diverse capabilities in pursuit of political objectives.

7.2. Domains as Interdependent Operational Systems

Although land, maritime, and air power remain essential for territorial control, deterrence, and power projection, their effectiveness is increasingly conditioned by capabilities in space, cyber, and the information environment. Domains should hence be understood not as discrete arenas but as interconnected subsystems within a broader strategic architecture (Bowen 2020; Freedman 2017).

The land domain continues to anchor political authority, as control of territory and populations remains a central objective of warfare. However, contemporary land operations depend heavily on space-enabled sensing, cyber resilience, and long-range precision fires. Artillery effectiveness, manoeuvre mobility, and force survivability increasingly rely on persistent surveillance, electronic warfare, and secure communications. Recent conflicts demonstrate that dispersion, combined-arms manoeuvre, and adaptive leadership remain decisive, yet these factors are embedded in wider networked and multidomain systems (Biddle and Friedman 2021; Watling and Reynolds 2023b).

Maritime power similarly reflects this interdependence. Sea control and the protection of global trade depend not only on fleets and submarines but also on satellite navigation, cyber-secured logistics, and long-range sensing. Anti-access and area-denial strategies illustrate how states integrate missiles, sensors, and information operations to contest maritime manoeuvre and impose strategic costs. As global economic interdependence deepens, the maritime domain becomes both a logistical foundation and a contested battlespace shaped by multidomain interaction (Till 2018; Holmes and Yoshihara 2018).

Airpower continues to provide speed, reach, and precision, yet contemporary air operations are inseparable from data networks, electronic warfare, and space-enabled targeting. The effectiveness of stealth, unmanned systems, and precision strike depends on resilient information architectures and the ability to operate in degraded environments. Airpower thus increasingly functions as a node within a broader multidomain system rather than an independent instrument (Warden 1995; Deptula, Penney, Stutzriem, and Gunzinger 2019).

Space has emerged as a critical enabler and contested domain. Satellite constellations underpin communication, navigation, early warning, and intelligence. Their vulnerability has driven efforts toward redundancy, dispersal, and rapid reconstitution. Control of orbital infrastructure shapes not only military effectiveness but also economic and societal resilience, making space central to deterrence and competition (Dolman 2002; Bowen 2020).

Cyber and electromagnetic operations link all domains by shaping command, infrastructure, and decision-making processes. At the same time, the information and cognitive environment has become a central arena in which legitimacy, perception, and strategic narratives are contested. In many cases, shaping behaviour and perception becomes as important as generating physical effects, reinforcing the expanding scope of military power in the contemporary era (Nye 2010; Thomas 2015).

This growing interdependence across domains reinforces the systemic nature of modern military power. Strategic advantage increasingly depends on the ability to generate cross-domain dilemmas for adversaries while protecting one's own systems from disruption. This dynamic shifts the focus from dominance within individual domains toward integration, resilience, and adaptive orchestration.

7.3. Cognition, Decision Superiority, and the Centrality of Information

Among the various dimensions of multidomain competition, the cognitive and informational sphere increasingly functions as the decisive arena in which strategic advantage is generated or lost.

In the multidomain era, cognition and decision-making increasingly constitute the central terrain of strategic competition. While physical destruction and territorial control remain relevant, contemporary conflict is shaped by the ability to influence perception, disrupt adversary decision cycles, and achieve informational advantage. As a result, military effectiveness depends not only on the capacity to generate kinetic effects but also on the ability to create decision superiority across political, operational, and tactical levels (Kania 2019).

Recent conflicts reinforce this dynamic. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that persistent sensing, open-source intelligence, and networked targeting can generate operational effects disproportionate to force size. Distributed sensors, commercial satellite imagery, and real-time intelligence sharing have accelerated targeting cycles and enhanced resilience under contested conditions. These developments highlight that information advantage is no longer monopolised by large states but increasingly distributed across alliances, partners, and commercial actors.

The war in Ukraine has also demonstrated the operational impact of rapid intelligence fusion and decentralised decision-making. Ukrainian forces have leveraged real-time intelligence from commercial satellites, unmanned systems, and allied support to compress targeting cycles and increase battlefield adaptability. This distributed model contrasts with more centralised command architectures and illustrates how decision superiority can offset material asymmetry. Similar approaches are increasingly emphasised in NATO and Indo-Pacific planning, where dispersed forces and resilient information sharing are viewed as essential for operating under contested conditions.

Decision superiority rests on integrating sensing, analysis, and execution. Modern architecture enables persistent situational awareness through space-based surveillance, cyber reconnaissance, signals intelligence, unmanned systems, and data fusion platforms. AI and machine learning increasingly support predictive analysis and anticipatory positioning rather than reactive response. However, the strategic advantage lies not in data accumulation but in the speed, coherence, and reliability of interpretation (Horowitz 2010).

The centrality of cognition also reflects the growing importance of perception management and narrative competition. Strategic influence extends beyond military institutions to political leadership, public opinion, alliance cohesion, and global legitimacy. Information operations, strategic communications, and cognitive warfare aim to shape adversary expectations, reinforce deterrence, and undermine resolve. NATO's growing emphasis on cognitive resilience and societal preparedness illustrates the recognition that psychological and informational dimensions are integral to contemporary security (Singer and Friedman 2014).

Decision cycles therefore become a decisive arena of competition. States seek to compress observation–decision–action loops and generate operational dilemmas. However, greater speed increases the risk of automation bias, misinterpretation, and escalation. Maintaining human judgment, institutional checks, and political oversight remains essential for strategic stability (Acton 2018; Strachan 2013; Johnson, Smith and Taylor 2020). In this sense, cognition and information redefine rather than replace traditional military power. They amplify its systemic character by linking operational tempo, political decision-making, and strategic influence across domains and levels of competition.

Contemporary strategic guidance increasingly reinforces this emphasis on decision advantage, resilience, and integrated information architectures as central to military effectiveness. Recent doctrinal developments stress that superiority in sensing, data fusion, and decision speed underpins deterrence, operational adaptability, and escalation control in contested environments. The growing importance of distributed intelligence, secure communications, and allied information sharing reflects a broader shift from platform-centric dominance toward systemic cognitive advantage.

7.4. Multidomain Deterrence and Strategic Competition

The emergence of MDOs represents not a departure from deterrence theory but its contemporary operationalisation. As outlined in earlier chapters, deterrence functions as a cognitive and relational process that shapes adversary expectations of cost, risk, and failure. In the multidomain era, this logic extends across interconnected domains and operates continuously along the competition continuum, integrating denial, deterrence by punishment, resilience, and signalling into a layered strategic posture (Freedman 2004; Mazarr 2015).

Recent strategic documents emphasise that adversaries increasingly pursue incremental advantage below the threshold of armed conflict through hybrid, cyber, and informational methods. Traditional deterrence models centred on nuclear retaliation and large-scale

conventional response are insufficient in this environment. Contemporary deterrence consequently relies on persistent presence, resilience, and multidomain readiness capable of denying gains across multiple fronts simultaneously (Nye 2017).

A central operational expression of deterrence by denial in the multidomain environment is developing A2/AD strategies. These approaches seek to prevent adversaries from projecting power into contested regions by integrating long-range precision fires, layered air and missile defence, cyber and electronic warfare, space-based sensing, and information operations into coherent defensive architectures. Rather than relying solely on territorial control, A2/AD systems aim to shape adversary decision-making by increasing uncertainty, operational risk, and the probability of failure. In this sense, A2/AD reflects a systemic and anticipatory logic consistent with contemporary deterrence theory (Posen 1984).

The strategic diffusion of A2/AD capabilities has become a defining feature of great-power competition. Russia's layered air and missile defence networks, precision strike systems, and electronic warfare in Kaliningrad and the Western Military District illustrate how regional denial can constrain NATO manoeuvre and complicate reinforcement. Similarly, China's development of long-range anti-ship missiles, integrated air defences, space-enabled targeting, and maritime surveillance seeks to limit external intervention and reshape the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific. These systems are not purely defensive; they also serve as instruments of influence, shaping escalation thresholds and reinforcing coercive diplomacy.

In this context, deterrence by denial has gained renewed importance. Contemporary strategy increasingly links denial with long-term endurance, recognising that deterrence depends not only on preventing rapid gains but also on demonstrating the capacity to sustain resistance under prolonged pressure. This emphasis reflects a growing recognition that resilience, regeneration, and operational continuity are central to shaping adversary expectations and reinforcing strategic stability.

IAMD, cyber resilience, space-based early warning, and infrastructure protection aim to undermine the feasibility of rapid or limited aggression. Ukraine's experience underscores how dispersed forces, layered air defence, deception, and resilient logistics can impose operational friction and deny decisive outcomes even against materially superior adversaries (Watling and Reynolds 2023b).

Beyond tactical denial, the conflict illustrates how multidomain resilience contributes to strategic deterrence. Recent strategic guidance also highlights integrating homeland and infrastructure defence with forward deterrence. Protecting critical networks, logistical nodes, and societal cohesion within national territory is increasingly viewed as an essential foundation for credible external deterrence, linking domestic resilience directly to multidomain competition and strategic stability.

Ukraine's ability to sustain logistics, restore infrastructure, and maintain societal cohesion under persistent attack has reinforced the credibility of its defensive posture. This endurance has complicated adversary expectations of rapid victory, demonstrating that resilience and denial are mutually reinforcing components of modern deterrence.

At the same time, the interaction of A2/AD and MDOs generates a dynamic cycle of competition. States seek not only to construct denial architectures but also to penetrate, disrupt, or bypass those of adversaries. Long-range precision strikes, cyber intrusion, space disruption, and distributed manoeuvre represent efforts to restore freedom of action in contested environments. As a result, deterrence increasingly involves mutual vulnerability and reciprocal constraints across domains rather than unilateral dominance.

These dynamics are particularly visible in the Indo-Pacific, where maritime and air forces are distributed, long-range precision fires are integrated, and resilient basing concepts are designed to operate in contested environments. U.S. and allied concepts such as distributed maritime operations and agile combat employment reflect efforts to maintain operational freedom despite adversary denial systems. These approaches illustrate how multidomain deterrence increasingly depends on adaptability, mobility, and alliance integration rather than fixed dominance.

Deterrence by punishment therefore remains essential but has become multidimensional. Retaliatory capacity extends beyond nuclear and conventional strike to include cyber operations, economic coercion, and information campaigns, enabling flexible escalation and calibrated signalling. However, cross-domain retaliation introduces ambiguity and risk, as responses may be misinterpreted or generate unintended escalation (Libicki 2009; Acton 2018).

Multidomain deterrence reinforces the continuous nature of strategic competition. Forward deployments, rotational presence, freedom-of-navigation operations, cyber monitoring, and strategic messaging shape adversary perceptions in peacetime, crisis, and conflict. These activities embed deterrence within persistent campaigning rather than episodic response (Brands and Gaddis 2021). This approach reflects a broader shift toward continuous competition, sustaining deterrence through posture, readiness, and operational presence across domains and regions rather than reactive mobilisation in crisis.

The effectiveness of this approach still depends on capability, credibility, and communication. Capability must be multidomain, sustainable, and resilient in contested environments shaped by denial architectures. Credibility is reinforced through readiness, alliance cohesion, and demonstrated capacity to operate within and through A2/AD environments. Communication requires synchronisation across military, diplomatic, and informational instruments to manage escalation and prevent misinterpretation.

Multidomain deterrence thus represents an integrated and adaptive framework for maintaining stability in complex and contested environments. By combining denial, deterrence by punishment, resilience, and signalling, it seeks to shape adversary expectations not only through the threat of retaliation but through the persistent demonstration that coercion will fail to achieve strategic objectives.

7.5. Organisational, Institutional, and Alliance Transformation

The transition toward MDOs requires profound organisational and institutional transformation. Traditional military structures were organised by domain, with separate service cultures, doctrines, and acquisition systems. While this specialisation produced operational expertise, it often constrained integration and slowed decision-making. Contemporary competition accordingly demands new institutional architectures capable of synchronising effects across domains and actors (Clarke and Knake 2020).

Joint and combined command structures have become central to this adaptation. Integrated planning, shared situational awareness, and unified operational frameworks enable coordination across land, maritime, air, cyber, and space. NATO's development of multidomain operational concepts and enhanced command structures illustrates this shift toward integrated and distributed decision-making.

The war in Ukraine has accelerated this transformation by highlighting the importance of rapid adaptation, decentralised command, and resilient logistics. It has also underscored the centrality of industrial capacity, supply chain resilience, and force regeneration in prolonged competition. As highlighted in the US National Defense Strategy 2026, contemporary strategic planning

increasingly treats the defence industrial base as a core component of deterrence and warfighting effectiveness, recognising that sustained MDOs are dependent on production, maintenance, and technological innovation over extended time horizons.

NATO members have expanded joint exercises, increased forward presence, and strengthened industrial cooperation to sustain prolonged competition. The conflict has also reinforced the need for interoperability in intelligence sharing, precision targeting, and IAMD.

Civil–military integration has also expanded. Multidomain competition increasingly involves critical infrastructure, technology ecosystems, and private-sector innovation. Governments must collaborate with industry, academia, and commercial providers to ensure resilience and technological advantages. Public–private partnerships in cyber defence, space operations, and data analytics demonstrate the growing role of non-state actors in military effectiveness (Nye 2011).

Alliances play a decisive role in this environment. Recent strategic developments emphasise distributed deterrence, in which allies and partners assume greater operational roles within networked architectures. This approach enhances resilience, complicates adversary planning, and distributes risk across multiple regions, reinforcing the credibility and sustainability of collective defence.

Collective frameworks amplify deterrence by pooling capabilities, sharing intelligence, and enhancing resilience. NATO’s IAMD, multinational battlegroups, and coordinated cyber defence illustrate the advantages and challenges of interoperability. Differences in doctrine, technology, and political priorities remain obstacles, but shared architectures strengthen collective credibility and complicate adversary planning (Art and Greenhill 2018b).

Similar institutional adaptations are visible in the Indo-Pacific. Initiatives such as AUKUS, enhanced U.S.–Japan and U.S.–Philippines cooperation, and expanded multinational exercises reflect a growing emphasis on networked deterrence and distributed operational architectures. These frameworks seek to integrate technological innovation, maritime security, and multidomain readiness across geographically dispersed partners.

Institutional transformation also extends to innovation and force development. Rapid technological change requires adaptive procurement, experimentation, and modular force design. Integrating AI, autonomy, and advanced sensing into operational concepts reflects a broader shift toward continuous adaptation rather than periodic modernisation (Kania 2019).

7.6. Risks, Escalation, and Systemic Vulnerability

Increasing domain interdependence introduces new risks and vulnerabilities. Multidomain systems are complex and interconnected, creating opportunities for cascading disruption. Cyber-attacks, space interference, or electronic warfare may degrade situational awareness, mobility, and decision-making simultaneously. The war in Ukraine and tensions in the Indo-Pacific highlight the growing importance of resilience against systemic disruption (Watling and Reynolds 2023a).

Escalation dynamics are particularly uncertain in cyber and space domains. Attribution challenges, ambiguous effects, and compressed timelines complicate crisis management and increase miscalculation risk. The war in Ukraine illustrates how cyber operations, space-based intelligence, and information campaigns interact with conventional combat while remaining below thresholds that might trigger wider escalation. These dynamics highlight the difficulty

of signalling intent and managing escalation in a multidomain environment characterised by ambiguity and rapid interaction.

At the same time, contemporary strategic guidance increasingly stresses balancing speed and automation with human judgment, institutional oversight, and escalation control. The integration of AI, autonomous systems, and machine-supported decision-making introduces new risks of misinterpretation, unintended escalation, and loss of strategic control, reinforcing the importance of governance, transparency, and resilient command structures.

AI introduces additional complexity. AI-enabled decision support enhances speed and precision but may reduce transparency and increase the risk of unintended interaction. Automation, if poorly governed, may accelerate escalation or produce unstable deterrence relationships (Horowitz 2010; Johnson, Smith and Taylor 2020).

Similar concerns arise in the Indo-Pacific, where close military interaction in maritime and air domains, combined with cyber and space competition, increases the risk of miscalculation. The proximity of advanced forces, contested grey-zone activities, and compressed decision timelines reinforce the importance of crisis communication, resilience, and escalation management mechanisms.

The information environment also presents strategic risks. Disinformation, cognitive manipulation, and influence campaigns may erode public trust, alliance cohesion, and political legitimacy. These dynamics target societal resilience rather than military capability, expanding the scope of modern competition (Singer and Friedman 2014; Brands 2021).

These vulnerabilities underscore the importance of resilience, redundancy, and adaptive governance. Multidomain effectiveness depends not only on integration but also on the ability to absorb shocks, sustain operations, and manage escalation in a highly dynamic strategic environment.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this chapter underscores that MDOs represent not merely a technological or doctrinal shift, but a broader transformation in the structure and purpose of military power. Contemporary effectiveness no longer derives from dominance in individual domains or from decisive battlefield engagements alone. Instead, it emerges from the ability to integrate capabilities, institutions, and decision-making processes across interconnected operational, cognitive, and societal systems. Military power in the multidomain era is then best understood as a form of systemic statecraft, embedded within persistent strategic competition and aligned with broader political, economic, and informational instruments.

Several overarching insights follow from this transformation. First, the logic of integration that has shaped military effectiveness throughout history has intensified in scope and tempo. From combined-arms and industrial mobilisation to nuclear deterrence and alliance-based security architectures, successful military systems have always depended on coordination across functions and domains. Multidomain competition amplifies this pattern by expanding the range of relevant domains and accelerating interaction among them. Strategic advantage now depends less on platform superiority than on the capacity to orchestrate distributed and resilient systems capable of generating cumulative and cross-domain effects.

Second, domains themselves are no longer discrete arenas of conflict but components of interdependent operational ecosystems. Land, maritime, and air power remain essential, yet their effectiveness increasingly depends on space-enabled sensing, cyber resilience, and

cognitive influence. Disruption in one domain can cascade across others, shifting strategy from localised superiority to systemic resilience and adaptive orchestration. This interdependence reinforces the importance of redundancy, dispersion, and endurance as central determinants of effectiveness.

Third, cognition and decision superiority have emerged as central terrains of competition. The capacity to sense, interpret, decide, and act faster and more coherently than adversaries shapes both operational outcomes and strategic stability. Recent conflicts demonstrate that distributed intelligence, networked targeting, and resilient information sharing can offset material asymmetries and sustain resistance under contested conditions. At the same time, the cognitive dimension extends beyond military institutions to include political leadership, public opinion, and alliance cohesion, reinforcing the systemic character of modern conflict.

Fourth, deterrence in the multidomain era is increasingly continuous, adaptive, and multidimensional. A2/AD architectures, resilience, and denial strategies seek to shape adversary expectations by increasing uncertainty and operational risk. Rather than relying solely on punishment or escalation dominance, contemporary deterrence integrates denial, endurance, and persistent presence across domains. This approach reflects the recognition that strategic competition unfolds over extended time horizons and that credibility rests on sustained readiness, alliance cohesion, and societal resilience.

Fifth, organisational and institutional transformation has become essential. Multidomain effectiveness requires integrated command structures, adaptive procurement, civil–military collaboration, and alliance interoperability. The defence industrial base, technological innovation, and private-sector partnerships increasingly function as core components of military power. Alliances, in turn, amplify resilience and distribute risk, turning deterrence into a networked, distributed enterprise rather than a purely national function.

Finally, the systemic nature of multidomain competition introduces new risks. Interdependence generates vulnerabilities to cascading disruption, while compressed decision cycles, automation, and ambiguity complicate escalation management. Cyber and space interactions, cognitive influence, and grey-zone activities blur thresholds and increase uncertainty. Strategic stability therefore depends not only on technological superiority but also on governance, transparency, and disciplined signalling that can manage competition without uncontrolled escalation.

Taken together, these dynamics reinforce a central conclusion of this book: military power in the contemporary era functions as a system of systems embedded in society, technology, and political authority. Its effectiveness depends as much on coherence, adaptability, and legitimacy as on material capability. The multidomain environment does not eliminate the enduring principles of strategy; rather, it intensifies their relevance by expanding the scope of integration, accelerating competition, and elevating the importance of cognition, resilience, and institutional capacity.

Understanding military power through this systemic and multidomain lens provides both analytical clarity and practical guidance. It highlights that success in contemporary competition will not be determined by isolated innovations or episodic victories, but by the sustained ability of states and alliances to integrate domains, manage complexity, and shape adversary behaviour across the full spectrum of cooperation, competition, crisis, and conflict.

8. CIVIL-MILITARY INTEGRATION IN STRATEGY

Civil–military integration constitutes a foundational pillar of contemporary national strategy. It ensures that the military instrument of power is employed coherently, responsibly, and in alignment with political objectives within an increasingly complex and multidomain strategic environment. In the twenty-first century, the effectiveness of military power depends not only on technological sophistication or operational excellence but on the quality of governance structures that organise, direct, and constrain its use. Civil–military integration should hence be understood as a core determinant of military effectiveness rather than merely an administrative feature of defence governance.

As Clausewitz observed, war is a continuation of policy by other means. Yet contemporary strategic competition has expanded the interfaces between civilian authority and military institutions far beyond the classical battlefield. Technological acceleration, persistent grey-zone rivalry, global interdependence, and alliance-based security architectures require continuous coordination across agencies, instruments of power, and levels of strategy. Military action is now embedded within a broader ecosystem that includes diplomacy, economic statecraft, information operations, and societal resilience.

Civil–military integration must therefore be understood not simply as hierarchical control but as a dynamic process of strategic governance. It involves translating political intent into operational design, synchronising military and non-military instruments, and maintaining legitimacy in both domestic and international arenas. This process operates continuously across the competition continuum, from cooperation and crisis management to high-intensity conflict.

This chapter examines the evolving foundations of civil–military integration in modern strategy. It explores the institutional and normative frameworks that sustain effective control, the persistent tensions that shape decision-making, and the organisational adaptations required to manage multidomain competition. It also considers the role of alliances, interagency coordination, and societal resilience in shaping contemporary military effectiveness. Together, these elements demonstrate that civil–military integration is not a secondary administrative concern but a central determinant of strategic success in the modern era.

8.1. Political Authority and Strategic Direction

Political authority constitutes the foundational organising principle of the military instrument of national power. As this book emphasises throughout, military effectiveness does not emerge solely from technological sophistication, organisational efficiency, or operational skills. Rather, it depends on political leadership's ability to define objectives, set priorities, allocate resources, and integrate military activity within a broader framework of national strategy. In the contemporary strategic environment, characterised by multidomain competition, technological diffusion, and persistent rivalry below the threshold of armed conflict, this requirement has become even more pronounced. Military power must be continuously aligned with diplomatic, economic, informational, and societal instruments to generate cumulative strategic advantage.

The classical formulation that war represents the continuation of policy by other means remains central, yet its operational meaning has expanded. Political direction today is not episodic or confined to moments of crisis; it is continuous, shaping posture, signalling, and resilience across the competition continuum. Modern strategic guidance reflects this logic. The United States' recent defence strategies emphasise integrated deterrence, persistent campaigning, and whole-of-government coordination, underscoring that military action must serve broader political objectives over extended time horizons. Similarly, NATO's evolving strategic concepts

highlight the centrality of political cohesion, alliance consultation, and collective decision-making as prerequisites for credible deterrence and effective defence.

Political authority thus performs a dual function. It ensures democratic legitimacy and accountability while providing the strategic coherence necessary to align military activity with national and alliance goals. This dual role becomes particularly important in multidomain environments where the boundaries between external defence, internal resilience, and societal preparedness are increasingly blurred. Decisions about force posture, cyber defence, space operations, and infrastructure protection involve not only military considerations but also legal, economic, and societal trade-offs. Effective political direction thus requires institutional structures that can integrate diverse expertise while preserving clarity of purpose.

Constitutional and Institutional Foundations

Across political systems, the central principle of political control ensures that military institutions remain instruments of the state rather than autonomous actors. The form and mechanisms of this control vary, but its strategic significance remains consistent: effective civil authority enables coherent strategy, while weak or contested control risks fragmentation, politicisation, or strategic incoherence.

Democratic systems institutionalise civilian supremacy through constitutional frameworks, legal accountability, and transparent oversight. Authority over the use of force is vested in elected leadership, typically presidents, prime ministers, or collective executive bodies, supported by legislatures that control budgets, authorise operations, and oversee defence policy. Judicial and legal mechanisms ensure compliance with constitutional norms, international law, and human rights obligations. Civilian-led ministries of defence translate political priorities into force structure, procurement, and long-term capability development. These mechanisms sustain legitimacy, strengthen public trust, and reinforce deterrence credibility by showing that military commitments reflect a durable political consensus.

Authoritarian systems use different mechanisms, often emphasising centralised command, party oversight, and political monitoring to maintain control over armed forces. In such contexts, the military may function as much as a pillar of regime stability as a national defence institution. While these arrangements can produce rapid decision-making and unity of command, they may also introduce rigidity, politicisation, and reduced transparency. The comparative experience of major powers illustrates these trade-offs. China's model of party control integrates military modernisation with broader national strategy but also reflects concerns about loyalty and political reliability. Russia's centralised command structure has facilitated rapid operational decisions but has also exposed vulnerabilities in adaptability, professional candour, and institutional feedback, as observed in the early phases of the war in Ukraine.

Contemporary conflicts underscore the strategic implications of institutional design. Ukraine's wartime governance illustrates how democratic legitimacy, civilian oversight, and societal mobilisation can reinforce military effectiveness. Integrating political leadership, military command, intelligence services, and civil society has enabled sustained resistance under intense pressure. Transparent communication, alliance coordination, and societal resilience have strengthened both domestic legitimacy and international support, demonstrating that institutional coherence and political credibility function as force multipliers in modern conflict.

Institutional structures also shape alliance effectiveness. NATO's political-military architecture, which combines collective decision-making with integrated command, shows how legitimacy, consultation, and shared governance enhance deterrence credibility. Collective

defence depends not only on capabilities but on the perception that political commitments are durable, coordinated, and supported by public consensus across member states. As strategic competition intensifies, institutional cohesion and political alignment remain essential for sustaining collective resilience and operational readiness.

Strategy Formulation and Political Objectives

Political leaders occupy the apex of strategy formulation. They define the ends of strategy, national interests, geopolitical aims, and desired political outcomes, and determine acceptable levels of cost, risk, and escalation. Military strategy, in turn, must translate these political objectives into operational concepts and resource allocations. This process reflects the classical ends–ways–means framework but is increasingly dynamic in contemporary environments characterised by uncertainty, technological change, and persistent competition.

Effective civil–military integration requires continuous interaction, not episodic consultation. Political objectives must be clear enough to guide military planning, yet flexible enough to accommodate changing conditions. Modern conflicts demonstrate the importance of adaptability. In Ukraine, political objectives - defending sovereignty, sustaining international support, and avoiding uncontrolled escalation - have required ongoing adjustment of operational priorities, force posture, and alliance engagement. Similarly, NATO’s evolving deterrence posture reflects continuous strategic reassessment in response to changing threat perceptions and technological developments.

Translating political intent into military action is one of the most challenging aspects of strategy. Tactical success does not automatically produce strategic advantage; indeed, operational victories may become counterproductive if they undermine political legitimacy, alliance cohesion, or escalation control. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan highlighted the risks of misalignment between political objectives and military operations, while contemporary strategic guidance emphasises integrated approaches that link security, governance, and legitimacy.

Feedback mechanisms are consequently central to effective governance. Military leaders must provide candid assessments of feasibility, risk, and uncertainty, while civilian leaders must remain open to reassessment and adaptation. This dialogue forms what scholars describe as an “uneasy partnership,” in which tension is not a sign of dysfunction but a necessary feature of strategic decision-making. Constructive friction encourages critical evaluation, prevents groupthink, and improves strategic outcomes (Cohen 2002; Feaver 2003).

Political leaders also bear responsibility for managing escalation and strategic risk. In multidomain environments, actions in cyber, space, or the information domain may produce unintended consequences or ambiguous effects. Decisions about force employment must therefore consider legal constraints, alliance dynamics, domestic legitimacy, and long-term strategic stability. Contemporary doctrines emphasise escalation management, signalling, and proportionality as central elements of modern strategy. Integrating military planning with diplomatic engagement, economic measures, and strategic communication reflects the recognition that coercion must be embedded in a broader framework of political control.

Ultimately, political authority ensures that military power remains purposeful rather than self-referential. By aligning objectives, resources, and institutional capacities, effective strategic direction transforms military capability into coherent statecraft. In the multidomain era, this alignment is not a one-time process but a continuous, adaptive function that shapes competition, deterrence, and crisis management across the spectrum of modern conflict.

Analytical Takeaways from Political Authority and Strategic Direction

The preceding analysis highlights several enduring principles that shape the relationship between political authority and military effectiveness. First, strategic coherence depends on continuously aligning military activity with political objectives across the competition continuum. Second, institutional design and legitimacy function as force multipliers, strengthening deterrence credibility, alliance cohesion, and societal resilience. Third, effective governance requires adaptive feedback mechanisms that let strategy evolve under uncertainty and friction. Finally, political authority plays a decisive role in managing escalation, balancing operational effectiveness with diplomatic, economic, and normative considerations. These principles underscore that military power is not autonomous but embedded within broader systems of governance and legitimacy.

8.2. Civil–Military Relations: Norms and Strategic Culture

While constitutional authority and institutional structures establish the formal architecture of civil–military control, the effectiveness of strategic governance depends equally on normative frameworks and cultural patterns that shape interaction between civilian leaders and military professionals. Civil–military relations are sustained not only through legal mechanisms but through shared expectations, professional ethics, and informal practices that guide decision-making under uncertainty. These norms constitute an “invisible architecture” that enables cooperation, candour, and mutual trust, particularly during crises when formal procedures are strained (Huntington 1957; Feaver 2003).

In the evolving strategic environment, these normative foundations are increasingly important. Persistent competition, MDOs, and hybrid threats require continuous interaction between political and military actors. The expansion of military roles in cyber defence, space security, infrastructure protection, and societal resilience further blurs traditional boundaries. As a result, effective civil–military relations must reconcile professional military autonomy with political oversight, ensuring both operational competence and democratic legitimacy.

Normative Foundations of Civil–Military Relations

Scholars of civil–military relations have long emphasised that stable and effective governance depends on a balance between professional expertise and civilian authority. Huntington’s concept of objective civilian control remains foundational, arguing that professional autonomy within the military sphere strengthens civilian supremacy by limiting political contestation and encouraging loyalty to constitutional authority (Huntington 1957). Janowitz (1960), by contrast, highlighted the increasing integration of military institutions within society, arguing that modern armed forces operate in politically sensitive environments that require continuous engagement with civilian institutions. More recent frameworks, such as Feaver’s principal–agent model, emphasise monitoring, compliance, and trust as central challenges in aligning civilian preferences with military behaviour (Feaver 2003). These theoretical perspectives converge on several core normative pillars that remain highly relevant in contemporary security environments.

Respect for Democratic Authority

Internalising civilian supremacy as a professional ethic remains essential. Military institutions must accept that elected leaders retain ultimate authority even when political choices diverge from operational preferences. This norm ensures democratic legitimacy and protects the military’s credibility as a national institution, not a partisan actor. Recent debates in several Western democracies about politicisation, public dissent by senior officers, and the military’s

role in domestic crises underscore the continued relevance of this principle (Brooks 2020). NATO's cohesion, for example, depends not only on capabilities but also on member states' shared commitment to democratic governance and civilian oversight.

Nonpartisanship and Institutional Neutrality

Political neutrality preserves trust across political transitions and reinforces societal confidence. In polarised environments, the risk of politicisation increases as political actors seek to leverage military legitimacy. Social media, public commentary by retired officers, and symbolic political use of military institutions have intensified this challenge. Maintaining neutrality is thus central to preserving public trust and preventing the erosion of democratic legitimacy (Golby, Feaver, and Dropp 2017).

Professionalism and Ethical Responsibility

Military professionalism encompasses technical competence, adherence to legal and ethical standards, and recognition of the limits of military expertise. In multidomain environments, professionalism also includes cyber ethics, responsible AI use, and compliance with international law in new operational domains (Johnson 2021). Contemporary conflicts highlight the strategic importance of ethical conduct. Ukraine's emphasis on transparency, adherence to legal norms, and communication with international audiences has reinforced external support and legitimacy, demonstrating that professionalism contributes directly to strategic outcomes.

Strategic Candour and Trust

An effective strategy depends on candid dialogue between civilian and military leaders. Honest assessments of risk, feasibility, and uncertainty enable informed decision-making and prevent strategic surprise. Historical failures, including intelligence misjudgments and optimistic reporting, illustrate the consequences of distorted communication (Cohen 2002). Contemporary environments characterised by rapid decision cycles and multidomain complexity further increase the importance of trust.

NATO decision-making processes, which rely on shared intelligence and continuous consultation, illustrate how institutionalised candour enhances collective credibility. Together, these norms form a shared professional culture that sustains effective governance. When these norms weaken, strategic coherence, operational effectiveness, and democratic legitimacy become vulnerable.

Sources of Tension in Civil–Military Interaction

Civil–military relations are inherently characterised by friction. Differences in organisational culture, time horizons, and risk perception are structural rather than pathological. When managed effectively, these tensions enhance strategic quality by encouraging debate and critical evaluation. Mismanaged, they can produce mistrust, politicisation, and operational failure.

Divergent Time Horizons

Political leaders operate within electoral cycles and shift public opinion, while military institutions plan over decades. This mismatch creates recurring tensions. Political urgency may drive rapid policy shifts, while military planning requires continuity and long-term investment. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan showed how shifting political priorities affected operational coherence (Strachan 2013). Similarly, NATO's adaptation to renewed great-power competition has required balancing long-term force development with immediate reassurance measures.

Risk Perception and Escalation Management

Political leaders often prioritise escalation control, alliance cohesion, and domestic legitimacy, while military leaders may emphasise operational clarity and mission effectiveness. In multidomain environments, these differences become more pronounced. Cyber operations, for example, involve uncertainty about attribution and escalation thresholds, complicating decision-making. The war in Ukraine illustrates these tensions: political leaders have sought to calibrate support to sustain deterrence while avoiding uncontrolled escalation (Watling and Reynolds 2023b).

Organisational Culture and Communication

Military planning emphasises clarity, hierarchy, and predictability, while political strategy often employs ambiguity and flexibility. This divergence can create misunderstandings about objectives and acceptable risk. Effective institutions mitigate these challenges through structured dialogue, planning processes, and continuous interaction.

These tensions are particularly evident in alliance environments. NATO decision-making requires consensus and balances national preferences, political constraints, and operational imperatives. This complexity can slow decision-making but enhances legitimacy and credibility. Similarly, Indo-Pacific partnerships, which involve diverse political systems and threat perceptions, illustrate the importance of sustained consultation and trust (Brands and Gaddis 2021).

Strategic Culture and Decision-Making

Strategic culture shapes how states perceive threats, evaluate risk, and employ military power. It reflects historical experience, geography, political institutions, and societal values. These factors influence preferences for deterrence, escalation, and the integration of military and non-military instruments (Gray 1999).

In Western democracies, strategic culture emphasises alliance cohesion, legal legitimacy, and control of escalation. NATO's emphasis on consensus, proportionality, and collective defence reflects this orientation. By contrast, China's strategic culture emphasises long-term competition, indirect methods, and the integration of military, economic, and informational tools. Its approach to grey-zone activity in the Indo-Pacific illustrates how strategic culture shapes operational behaviour (Kania 2019). Russia's emphasis on hybrid warfare, strategic ambiguity, and escalation management similarly reflects historical experience and institutional patterns.

Understanding these cultural dimensions is essential for effective deterrence and competition. Misinterpreting adversary behaviour or signalling can create escalation risks. Cultural awareness enhances strategic communication, alliance coordination, and crisis management.

Strategic culture also shapes domestic civil–military interaction. Societies with strong traditions of civilian oversight and professional military identity tend to sustain stable governance even under stress. In contrast, where political institutions are weak or contested, military influence may expand, undermining democratic legitimacy and strategic coherence (Owens 2011).

Norms, culture, and institutional trust constitute the cognitive and relational foundations of civil–military integration. They enable effective communication, support legitimacy, and sustain coherence across complex and multidomain environments. As military power becomes increasingly embedded in technological, societal, and informational systems, the quality of civil–military relations will play a decisive role in shaping strategic effectiveness.

8.3. Civil–Military Integration in the Competition Continuum

The evolving strategic environment is characterised by persistent interaction across cooperation, competition, crisis, and conflict. As outlined in earlier chapters, the traditional distinction between peace and war has eroded, replaced by a continuum of activity in which states employ military and non-military instruments simultaneously to shape strategic outcomes. In this environment, civil–military integration can no longer be understood as episodic coordination during war or crisis. Rather, it constitutes a continuous governance process that aligns political authority, military capability, and societal resilience across domains and time horizons. This shift reflects broader transformations in strategic competition, technological diffusion, and the growing importance of perception, legitimacy, and systemic endurance (Mazarr 2015).

Recent strategic guidance emphasises that military power must be embedded within broader statecraft, functioning as part of integrated deterrence and persistent campaigning. The United States’ concept of integrated deterrence and NATO’s evolving strategic posture both stress the importance of continuous synchronisation across political, military, economic, and informational instruments to shape adversary expectations and manage escalation. Civil–military integration consequently becomes central not only to operational effectiveness but to strategic positioning across the competition continuum.

At its core, civil–military integration in this context involves dynamically aligning ends, ways, and means under conditions of uncertainty. Political leaders define objectives, risk tolerance, and escalation thresholds, while military institutions develop operational approaches that generate cumulative advantage. This relationship is iterative and adaptive, reflecting the recognition that contemporary competition unfolds over extended periods and across multiple domains. Feedback mechanisms, strategic reassessment, and institutional learning are therefore essential to maintaining coherence and responsiveness (Strachan 2013).

Civil–Military Integration in Cooperative and Competitive Phases

Even in periods of relative stability, civil–military coordination plays a central role in shaping strategic conditions. Confidence-building measures, arms control, alliance consultation, and joint exercises function simultaneously as reassurance, deterrence, and signalling. These activities require close coordination between diplomatic and military institutions to ensure that operational posture supports political objectives and strategic communication.

In competitive phases below the threshold of armed conflict, this integration becomes even more critical. Persistent military presence, forward deployments, cyber monitoring, and information operations must be synchronised with diplomatic engagement, economic policy, and technological competition. NATO’s rotational deployments in Eastern Europe and maritime presence operations in the Indo-Pacific illustrate how calibrated military activities support deterrence while avoiding uncontrolled escalation (Brands and Gaddis 2021). Similarly, freedom-of-navigation operations, joint exercises, and force posture adjustments function as instruments of strategic signalling embedded within broader statecraft.

The war in Ukraine provides a contemporary example of civil–military integration across competitive and conflict phases. Western support has combined military assistance, intelligence sharing, economic sanctions, diplomatic coordination, and strategic communication. Political leadership has played a decisive role in calibrating escalation, managing alliance cohesion, and sustaining domestic legitimacy. This approach reflects a multidomain, systemic logic in which military effects are embedded in a broader strategy of cumulative pressure and endurance (Watling and Reynolds 2023a). Similar patterns are visible in the Indo-Pacific. Initiatives such

as AUKUS, enhanced U.S.–Japan cooperation, and multinational exercises reflect the integration of military capability, technological innovation, and political signalling. These frameworks aim to strengthen deterrence, resilience, and alliance cohesion while shaping long-term strategic competition.

Crisis Management and Escalation Control

During crises, the tempo and stakes of civil–military interaction increase significantly. Decision-making must balance operational effectiveness with escalation control, alliance unity, and domestic legitimacy. This requires rapid, structured, and disciplined consultation between political leaders, military commanders, intelligence institutions, and allied partners. Modern crises are multidomain and information-intensive. Cyber operations, space disruptions, hybrid tactics, and disinformation may generate escalation without clear thresholds. Civil–military integration accordingly depends on real-time intelligence, shared situational awareness, and coordinated strategic communication. The NATO response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine since 2014 illustrates how integrated consultation mechanisms enhance alignment, reduce uncertainty, and reinforce deterrence.

Strategic communication plays a particularly important role. Political leaders must signal resolve while preserving flexibility and control over escalation. Military posture, mobilisation, and exercises function as signalling instruments and must be closely synchronised with diplomatic engagement. Misalignment between political messaging and military actions can undermine credibility or trigger unintended escalation (Acton 2018). Institutionalised crisis-management structures, including NATO political consultation mechanisms and bilateral strategic dialogues, enhance coordination and transparency. These frameworks help align national preferences, clarify objectives, and sustain collective credibility in high-risk environments.

Civil–Military Integration in Armed Conflict

In armed conflict, civil–military integration remains indispensable to strategic success. Contrary to assumptions that military autonomy increases during war, contemporary conflict requires continuous political guidance and adaptation. Military operations generate political, legal, and informational effects that must be managed in real time.

The war in Ukraine demonstrates the importance of sustained political direction and alliance coordination. Ukrainian leadership has integrated military operations with diplomatic engagement, strategic communication, and coalition management. Decisions on force employment, targeting, and escalation have been closely aligned with broader political goals, reinforcing legitimacy and sustaining external support. This integration has contributed to resilience and strategic endurance despite material asymmetry (Watling and Reynolds 2022).

Historical experience similarly underscores this principle. From World War II coalition warfare to contemporary stabilisation operations, strategic effectiveness has depended on continuous interaction between civilian and military leadership. Political leaders shape priorities, allocate resources, and manage alliances, while military institutions provide operational expertise and feedback. Breakdown in this relationship often produces strategic incoherence and operational failure (Strachan 2013).

Continuity, Adaptation, and Institutional Learning

The competition continuum requires continuous adaptation. Civil–military systems must evolve in response to technological change, adversary innovation, and shifting societal expectations. Lessons from Ukraine have accelerated institutional learning across NATO, particularly in logistics, readiness, industrial mobilisation, and multidomain coordination. These developments reinforce the importance of resilience, flexibility, and sustained strategic alignment. Similarly, Indo-Pacific competition is driving adaptation in distributed operations, resilient basing, and networked alliances. These initiatives highlight the importance of innovation, experimentation, and public–private collaboration in sustaining multidomain advantage (Kania 2019).

Civil–military integration also depends on public legitimacy. Democratic societies require sustained communication, transparency, and societal resilience to support long-term competition. Public trust strengthens deterrence credibility and national endurance, while erosion of legitimacy undermines strategic effectiveness (Brands 2021). Civil–military integration across the competition continuum constitutes a central determinant of contemporary strategic effectiveness. It ensures coherence between political objectives and military action, supports deterrence and escalation management, and strengthens resilience across domains and phases of conflict. In an era defined by persistent rivalry, multidomain interaction, and systemic vulnerability, the quality of civil–military coordination will shape not only operational outcomes but the broader capacity of states and alliances to sustain strategic advantage over time.

8.4. Interagency and Whole-of-Government Coordination

The complexity of evolving strategic environments has elevated interagency coordination and whole-of-government approaches from supporting functions to central pillars of national strategy. Military power no longer operates in isolation. Instead, it is embedded within a broader ecosystem of diplomatic, economic, informational, technological, and societal instruments. The effectiveness of military action, therefore, depends on how coherently these instruments are integrated and directed toward common political objectives.

This integration is especially critical amid persistent strategic competition, hybrid threats, and MDOs. Adversaries increasingly exploit institutional fragmentation, bureaucratic silos, and decision-making delays. As a result, strategic advantage depends not only on capabilities but on governance capacity: the ability to coordinate across ministries, agencies, and partners in real time. Contemporary doctrine emphasises that integrated deterrence and campaigning require synchronisation across military, diplomatic, economic, technological, and informational tools. The systemic nature of modern conflict therefore reinforces the need for robust interagency mechanisms that align ends, ways, and means across the full spectrum of competition.

National Security Decision-Making Systems

Effective civil–military integration requires institutionalised decision-making structures that connect political leadership with operational execution. National security councils, cabinet committees, and interministerial coordination bodies form the core of this architecture. These institutions translate political priorities into strategic guidance, coordinate resource allocation, and manage crisis response.

In the United States, the National Security Council (NSC) system exemplifies this approach. It integrates diplomatic, military, intelligence, economic, and technological perspectives,

enabling coordinated decision-making across departments. Recent strategic guidance emphasises the NSC's role in integrated deterrence, reflecting the recognition that competition unfolds across multiple domains simultaneously. Similarly, NATO's political–military structures link the North Atlantic Council with military command frameworks, ensuring that alliance operations remain aligned with collective political objectives.

The war in Ukraine highlights the importance of such coordination. Western support has required sustained interaction among defence ministries, foreign affairs departments, intelligence agencies, and economic institutions. Regular coordination mechanisms have enabled rapid decisions on military assistance, sanctions, and diplomatic messaging, illustrating how institutionalised structures enhance responsiveness and credibility.

At the same time, decision-making complexity introduces trade-offs. Consensus-based systems enhance legitimacy but may slow action. Authoritarian systems may enable faster decisions but often lack transparency, feedback, and adaptability. These differences shape strategic effectiveness, particularly in prolonged competition where resilience and learning prove decisive.

Crisis Management and Escalation Control

Modern crises unfold across domains and institutions, requiring coordinated responses that balance military readiness, diplomatic signalling, economic pressure, and informational strategy. Crisis management therefore depends on integrated planning, shared situational awareness, and clearly defined escalation frameworks.

The multidomain character of contemporary crises increases uncertainty and speed. Cyber intrusions, space disruptions, and information campaigns may unfold rapidly and ambiguously, complicating attribution and decision-making (Acton 2018; Nye 2017). Effective crisis management thus requires coordination among military, intelligence, diplomatic, and economic actors.

Recent crises involving Ukraine demonstrate these dynamics. NATO and EU coordination has focused not only on military readiness but also on communication strategies, sanctions, and economic resilience. Crisis response has involved continuous consultation, shared intelligence, and calibrated signalling designed to deter escalation while maintaining unity.

Institutional mechanisms such as joint crisis cells, interagency task forces, and alliance coordination frameworks enable rapid decision-making and consistent messaging. These structures reduce misperception, enhance deterrence credibility, and strengthen resilience under pressure.

Intelligence–Military Coordination

Intelligence integration is central to modern strategy. Accurate and timely intelligence enables early warning, threat assessment, and calibrated responses across the competition continuum. Effective civil–military coordination therefore depends on fusing intelligence with operations planning and political decision-making.

Contemporary conflicts highlight the transformative role of intelligence sharing. In Ukraine, real-time intelligence from national and allied sources, including commercial and open-source data, has enabled rapid targeting, enhanced situational awareness, and improved operational adaptability. This integration has strengthened both deterrence and defence by reducing uncertainty and accelerating decision cycles (Watling and Reynolds 2022).

Alliance intelligence cooperation has also expanded. NATO's intelligence structures and national contributions create shared situational awareness, reinforcing collective defence and crisis response. The increasing role of commercial providers in satellite imagery and cyber monitoring reflects the broader expansion of the intelligence ecosystem beyond traditional state actors.

At the same time, intelligence coordination presents challenges. Information overload, classification barriers, and differences in national capabilities can complicate sharing. Balancing secrecy with interoperability remains a persistent tension. Effective governance thus requires secure communication, trust, and institutionalised exchange.

Economic Statecraft and Sanctions

Economic instruments have become central components of modern strategy. Sanctions, export controls, financial measures, and energy policies increasingly function as tools of coercion, deterrence, and competition. Their effectiveness depends on coordination between economic, diplomatic, and military institutions. The response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates the scale and complexity of economic statecraft. Coordinated sanctions among the United States, the European Union, and partners have targeted financial systems, energy exports, and technological supply chains. These measures aim not only to impose costs but to constrain long-term military capacity and technological development.

As prominent international relations scholars note, economic statecraft serves as a critical complement to military deterrence by influencing an adversary's long-term strategic calculations (Baldwin 1985). However, the implementation of economic sanctions inherently carries significant risks, frequently producing unintended consequences such as global market disruptions and unintended strategic realignments among targeted states (Drezner 2021).

This integration reinforces the systemic nature of modern competition. Economic resilience, industrial capacity, and technological innovation have become core components of national security, linking economic policy directly to military effectiveness.

Technology, Innovation, and Industrial Policy

Technological competition has become a central arena of strategic rivalry. AI, cyber capabilities, space systems, and advanced manufacturing shape military effectiveness and strategic influence. As a result, coordination between defence, industry, research institutions, and economic policy has expanded significantly.

Recent strategies emphasise the importance of innovation ecosystems. Governments increasingly collaborate with private firms, universities, and allied partners to accelerate technological development and maintain competitive advantage (Kania 2019). Public-private partnerships in cybersecurity, space operations, and data analytics illustrate this shift.

Ukraine again provides a contemporary example. Rapid adaptation, commercial drone innovation, and digital resilience have demonstrated how technological agility and civil-military collaboration can offset conventional asymmetry. Integrating private-sector capabilities into military operations reflects the evolving nature of national power.

Similarly, the European Union's initiatives in defence industrial coordination, joint procurement, and technological resilience highlight the growing role of supranational governance in military effectiveness. These developments reflect a broader trend toward distributed and networked security architectures.

Interagency and whole-of-government coordination has become a decisive determinant of strategic effectiveness. Modern conflict and competition unfold simultaneously across political, military, economic, technological, and informational domains. Military power therefore functions as one component within a broader strategic system.

Effective coordination enhances deterrence credibility, resilience, and adaptability. It enables states to respond rapidly to crises, sustain prolonged competition, and integrate multidomain capabilities. Conversely, fragmentation and institutional rivalry create vulnerabilities that adversaries can exploit.

The evolving strategic environment thus reinforces a central insight: national power is not merely the sum of its instruments but the product of their integration. Governance capacity, institutional coherence, and strategic coordination increasingly shape outcomes as much as battlefield performance. As great-power competition intensifies, the ability to synchronise military and non-military tools will remain a defining feature of successful statecraft.

8.5. Civil–Military Integration and Multidomain Operations

The transition toward MDOs fundamentally transforms the nature of civil–military integration. As Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty demonstrated, contemporary military power is exercised through interconnected land, maritime, air, space, cyber, electromagnetic, and cognitive–informational domains. The effectiveness of these operations depends not only on technological capability or operational doctrine but also on the capacity of political and military institutions to coordinate decision-making, align strategic objectives, and manage risk across complex, rapidly evolving environments. Civil–military integration thus becomes a central enabler of multidomain effectiveness.

In earlier eras, civil–military interaction focused primarily on the relationship between political authority and conventional military operations. Today, multidomain competition expands this interface to encompass intelligence, economic policy, technology governance, infrastructure resilience, and societal preparedness. Strategic effectiveness increasingly depends on the ability to synchronise these elements in real time. Contemporary doctrine then emphasises integrated deterrence, decision superiority, and whole-of-government coordination as central to maintaining advantage in persistent competition.

Decision Superiority and Strategic Governance

Decision superiority, identified in Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty as a central determinant of multidomain competition, requires governance structures that can integrate information, intelligence, and political judgment under conditions of uncertainty and speed. Civil–military integration ensures that technological advances in sensing, AI, and data analytics translate into strategically coherent decisions rather than fragmented or reactive responses.

Modern conflicts illustrate that rapid information processing alone does not produce an advantage. Strategic effectiveness depends on the capacity to interpret, prioritise, and act in ways aligned with political objectives. The war in Ukraine highlights the importance of this integration. Distributed sensing, real-time intelligence, and digital communication have enhanced operational agility, yet success has depended equally on political leadership that aligns military operations with diplomatic messaging, alliance coordination, and societal resilience.

Governance structures must therefore reconcile competing imperatives: speed versus deliberation, autonomy versus oversight, and operational initiative versus escalation control.

Decision superiority becomes not merely a technical capability but a political–institutional process linking national leadership, operational commanders, and interagency actors. As Freedman (2017) emphasises, strategy remains fundamentally a process of choice under uncertainty, requiring political judgment even in technologically advanced environments.

Political Oversight of Artificial Intelligence-and Autonomous Systems

Integrating AI, autonomy, and machine learning into military operations introduces new governance challenges. These technologies enhance speed, precision, and adaptability but also raise ethical, legal, and strategic concerns. Civilian oversight remains essential to ensure that technological innovation aligns with national values, legal frameworks, and escalation management.

Political leaders must define the acceptable scope of autonomy, establish accountability mechanisms, and ensure compliance with international law. Issues such as human control, algorithmic bias, and unintended escalation require institutionalised review processes and transparency. Contemporary strategic guidance increasingly emphasises responsible AI, ethical innovation, and human oversight as central components of national security policy.

The Ukraine conflict again illustrates both opportunities and risks. Autonomous and semi-autonomous systems, including drones and targeting software, have enhanced battlefield effectiveness. At the same time, their rapid proliferation underscores the need for governance frameworks that can regulate escalation, protect civilian populations, and maintain legitimacy.

In the Indo-Pacific context, technological competition between major powers further reinforces the importance of governance. States increasingly view AI as a strategic enabler of MDOs, yet the absence of shared norms increases uncertainty and escalation risk (Kania 2019; Acton 2018). Civil–military integration must accordingly extend to technology policy, arms control, and alliance coordination.

Integrated Command and Political Control

MDOs require command structures that can synchronise effects across domains and levels of strategy. Traditional service-centric command models are insufficient in environments where cyber operations shape land manoeuvre, space systems enable maritime targeting, and information campaigns influence political outcomes.

Integrated command architectures connect political leadership with joint and combined operational frameworks. NATO’s evolution toward multidomain command and control illustrates this trend. Political authorities increasingly require real-time situational awareness, while military leaders must translate strategic intent into distributed operations across multiple theatres.

The balance between centralised direction and decentralised execution becomes particularly important. Political leaders must retain control over escalation, alliance commitments, and strategic objectives, while operational commanders require flexibility to adapt under contested conditions. This balance reflects longstanding civil–military principles but is intensified by the speed and complexity of multidomain environments.

Recent experience demonstrates that resilient and distributed command structures enhance survivability and adaptability. Ukraine’s decentralised command and mission command philosophy has enabled rapid adaptation and operational resilience, reinforcing the strategic importance of flexible governance frameworks.

Resilience, Infrastructure Protection, and Societal Integration

Multidomain competition increasingly targets critical infrastructure, economic networks, and societal cohesion. Cyber intrusions, sabotage, disinformation, and attacks on energy or communications systems aim to undermine resilience rather than directly defeat military forces. Civil–military integration therefore extends beyond defence institutions to encompass national resilience and societal preparedness.

Infrastructure protection requires coordination among defence, intelligence, law enforcement, economic regulators, and private-sector operators. The protection of undersea cables, energy grids, space assets, and digital networks illustrates the multidimensional character of modern defence. NATO and EU initiatives on critical infrastructure protection and resilience reflect growing recognition that deterrence depends on the ability to sustain societal functioning under pressure.

Ukraine again provides a contemporary case. Sustained attacks on energy systems, logistics, and communications have demonstrated that resilience and rapid recovery are central to strategic endurance. Civil–military cooperation in restoring infrastructure, managing population protection, and maintaining economic activity has reinforced both operational effectiveness and international support.

Resilience thus becomes a core component of multidomain deterrence. The ability to absorb shocks, maintain decision-making, and sustain operations reduces adversary incentives and strengthens credibility.

Public–Private Partnerships and Innovation Ecosystems

The diffusion of advanced technologies has transformed the relationship between the state and private actors. Commercial providers now play central roles in space sensing, cybersecurity, data analytics, and communications. Effective MDOs thus require sustained collaboration between governments, industry, and research institutions.

Public–private partnerships enable rapid innovation, technological adaptation, and resilience. Ukraine's use of commercial satellite imagery, secure communication platforms, and cyber defence tools illustrates the operational significance of these partnerships. Similarly, Western strategies increasingly emphasise technological ecosystems and supply chain security as foundations of military power.

However, reliance on private actors introduces new governance challenges. Accountability, information security, legal authority, and operational integration require clear frameworks. Strategic competition increasingly unfolds in dual-use domains where civilian and military boundaries are blurred.

The European Union's efforts to coordinate defence industrial policy, technological resilience, and digital security highlight the growing importance of supranational governance in this area. These initiatives reflect the recognition that technological and industrial capacity underpins multidomain effectiveness.

Civil–military integration in the multidomain era extends beyond traditional oversight and coordination. It encompasses technology governance, resilience, decision-making, and innovation. Strategic effectiveness increasingly depends on integrating political authority, military capability, societal resilience, and technological capacity into a coherent system.

The multidomain environment intensifies the need for adaptive institutions, ethical governance, and continuous coordination. Decision superiority, integrated command, infrastructure

protection, and public–private collaboration emerge as central determinants of advantage. These dynamics reinforce the book's broader theme: military power is not merely a collection of capabilities, but a systemic and institutional phenomenon embedded in political authority, societal capacity, and strategic governance.

8.6. Alliances, Partnerships, and Collective Strategy

Alliances and strategic partnerships have become central pillars of contemporary security governance. In an era characterised by persistent competition, technological diffusion, and multidomain interaction, no state can generate or sustain strategic advantage in isolation. Collective strategy accordingly represents not merely an aggregation of national capabilities but a system of political coordination, military integration, and shared legitimacy. Civil–military integration within alliances is thus a decisive determinant of strategic effectiveness.

Historically, alliances served primarily as instruments of balancing and deterrence, pooling military capabilities to counter common threats. In the contemporary environment, however, alliances have evolved into complex institutional ecosystems encompassing intelligence sharing, technological cooperation, economic resilience, and coordinated strategic communication. These functions extend beyond crisis response to persistent competition, shaping adversary perceptions across the competition continuum. Contemporary doctrine emphasises that integrated deterrence increasingly depends on alliance cohesion, interoperability, and shared resilience.

At the same time, alliance governance introduces unique challenges. Divergent political priorities, domestic constraints, and resource disparities require sustained negotiation and institutional adaptation. Effective collective strategy therefore depends on shared political authority, credible military integration, and legitimacy derived from common norms and values.

NATO Political–Military Integration

The North Atlantic Alliance represents the most advanced example of political–military integration in modern international relations. NATO's structure links political authority with operational command, ensuring that military action remains aligned with collective strategic objectives. The North Atlantic Council provides the political forum for consensus-based decision-making, while integrated military commands translate guidance into operations planning and execution.

This institutional design enhances credibility and legitimacy. Consensus decision-making reinforces political cohesion and signals unity to adversaries. Integrated command structures enable rapid, coordinated responses, while shared planning processes build interoperability across national forces. These features have proven central to deterrence and crisis management, particularly following Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Since 2014, and especially after 2022, NATO has strengthened forward presence, multidomain readiness, and infrastructure resilience along its eastern flank. Enhanced multinational battlegroups, IAMD, and coordinated exercises demonstrate the alliance's ability to generate credible deterrence through persistent presence and collective capability. These initiatives illustrate the evolving integration of defence, deterrence, and resilience within a multidomain framework.

At the same time, NATO's adaptation highlights persistent challenges. Consensus processes may slow decision-making, particularly in crises. Differences in threat perception, domestic political priorities, and resource allocation require continuous diplomatic engagement.

Nevertheless, the alliance's ability to sustain cohesion under pressure underscores the importance of institutionalised political–military coordination.

Indo-Pacific Networked Deterrence

The strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific differs from Europe's, yet similar dynamics of collective strategy are emerging. Rather than a single formal alliance, the region is characterised by overlapping partnerships, bilateral treaties, and flexible coalitions. This architecture reflects diverse political systems, threat perceptions, and geographic conditions.

Networked deterrence has become a central concept in this context. States seek to integrate capabilities across maritime, cyber, space, and informational domains while preserving national autonomy. Frameworks such as AUKUS, expanded U.S.–Japan cooperation, enhanced defence ties with Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines, and growing multilateral exercises illustrate this approach.

These arrangements emphasise interoperability, resilience, and distributed operations. Multidomain exercises, intelligence sharing, and technological collaboration enhance deterrence by complicating adversary planning. Rather than relying on centralised structures, networked deterrence creates overlapping layers of capability and presence.

This approach also reflects broader strategic competition. Regional states seek to balance economic interdependence with security concerns. Civil–military coordination within these partnerships hence involves economic policy, technological standards, and supply chain resilience alongside military cooperation. These dynamics highlight the expanding scope of collective strategy in contemporary environments.

Coalition Warfare and Operational Integration

Coalition warfare remains a defining feature of modern military operations. From the Gulf War to Afghanistan and contemporary support to Ukraine, major operations increasingly involve multinational forces. Operational effectiveness depends on interoperability, shared situational awareness, and coordinated command structures.

MDOs intensify these requirements. Coalition partners must integrate cyber defence, space-enabled sensing, precision fires, and information operations. Shared command-and-control architectures and secure communications become essential.

The Ukraine war illustrates both the advantages and challenges of coalition support. Intelligence sharing, coordinated training, and integrated logistics have enhanced Ukrainian capabilities. At the same time, differences in doctrine, technology, and political constraints complicate coordination. Sustained consultation and adaptation remain necessary.

Coalition operations also require clear political guidance. Civilian leaders must align objectives, escalation thresholds, and resource commitments across partners. Effective coalition warfare thus depends as much on political integration as on military capability.

Burden-Sharing, Legitimacy, and Strategic Sustainability

Burden-sharing has long been central to alliance politics. Resource disparities can undermine cohesion and credibility if perceived as unfair or unsustainable. At the same time, shared contributions enhance legitimacy and reinforce political commitment.

The renewed emphasis on defence spending and capability targets within NATO reflects recognition that credible deterrence requires equitable contributions. Collective resilience,

infrastructure protection, and industrial capacity have become central components of burden-sharing in the multidomain era.

Legitimacy extends beyond resources. Alliances derive strength from shared values, legal frameworks, and public support. Democratic governance, transparency, and adherence to international law enhance credibility and reinforce strategic narratives. This legitimacy shapes global perceptions and strengthens deterrence by signalling unity and resolve.

At the same time, legitimacy is contested. Adversaries increasingly employ information operations to undermine alliance cohesion, exploit political divisions, and weaken public support. Civil–military integration must therefore extend to strategic communication and societal resilience.

Sustained alliance cohesion depends on adaptability. Technological change, emerging threats, and evolving power distributions require continuous institutional innovation. Alliances must integrate new domains, partners, and capabilities while preserving political unity.

Alliances and partnerships represent the institutional embodiment of modern strategic integration. They extend national power, enhance resilience, and generate legitimacy. In the multidomain era, collective strategy becomes a system of systems linking political authority, military capability, technological innovation, and societal resilience across multiple actors.

Alliance effectiveness depends not only on capabilities but also on governance, trust, and shared purpose. NATO’s integrated structures, Indo-Pacific networked deterrence, and coalition warfare illustrate different pathways toward collective effectiveness. Each reflects the broader transformation of military power into a systemic and relational phenomenon.

As great-power competition intensifies, the ability to coordinate across alliances, partnerships, and coalitions will remain a decisive determinant of strategic success. Collective strategy thus represents both a continuation of historical balancing patterns and an adaptation to the complexity of multidomain competition.

8.7. Risks and Pathologies of Civil–Military Integration

Civil–military integration is essential for aligning political authority with military capability. Effective integration lets governments translate political objectives into military strategy while preserving democratic oversight of the use of force. In modern security environments, however, the relationship between civilian leadership and military institutions is inherently complex. Civilian authorities must retain control over national security policy, while military professionals require sufficient autonomy to plan and conduct operations effectively (Feaver 2003).

This balance becomes particularly difficult during periods of major conflict or systemic geopolitical competition. Contemporary warfare involves MDOs, technological innovation, economic mobilisation, and societal resilience, all of which require close coordination across civilian and military institutions. These demands can generate tensions within governance structures, especially when political priorities, institutional interests, and operational requirements diverge.

The ongoing war in Ukraine provides a particularly relevant empirical case for examining these dynamics. As the largest interstate war in Europe since the end of the Cold War, the conflict offers valuable insights into how civil–military governance functions under prolonged, high-intensity warfare. Throughout this section, selected examples from the Ukrainian experience

illustrate the potential risks and institutional pathologies that may emerge in civil–military relations during major conflicts.

Although civil–military systems in democratic states are designed to prevent institutional breakdowns, distortions can still arise gradually. These typically emerge through politicisation of military institutions, misalignment between political objectives and military strategy, bureaucratic fragmentation across security institutions, tensions between civilian oversight and military autonomy, and pressures on democratic accountability in wartime governance.

Politicisation of Military Institutions

One of the most significant risks in civil–military relations is the politicisation of military institutions. Politicisation occurs when armed forces become aligned with particular political factions, ideological agendas, or regime interests rather than serving the state and constitutional order as a whole. Such dynamics can weaken professional military norms, undermine institutional neutrality, and erode public trust in the armed forces (Brooks 2008).

Politicisation may take several forms. Political leaders may attempt to shape military institutions through politically motivated promotions, selective appointments, or pressure on operational decision-making. Conversely, military officers may become involved in political debates, publicly challenge government policy, or exercise informal influence beyond their professional advisory role. Both tendencies can distort the institutional balance between civilian authority and military professionalism.

The war in Ukraine illustrates how tensions can arise even within democratic civil–military systems during prolonged wartime conditions. In February 2024, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky replaced the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, appointing Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi, previously commander of the Ukrainian Ground Forces, as his successor. The leadership change followed debates about operational strategy after the 2023 counteroffensive, mobilisation policies, and communication regarding the war’s trajectory (Kofman and Lee 2023).

General Zaluzhnyi had publicly described the conflict as entering a phase of positional warfare approaching a “stalemate”, highlighting the growing difficulties of achieving rapid operational breakthroughs against entrenched defences (Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskyi 2023). Ukrainian political leadership, however, emphasised the importance of maintaining public morale and sustaining international support for the war effort. The episode therefore reflected a divergence between military assessments and political communication priorities rather than a fundamental breakdown of civil–military relations.

Leadership changes during wartime are not historically unusual. Political leaders have frequently replaced senior commanders when strategic circumstances required adjustments in leadership or operational approach. Examples include President Abraham Lincoln’s repeated replacement of Union generals during the American Civil War and President Harry Truman’s dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War. The Ukrainian case consequently illustrates a broader historical pattern in which political authorities retain the prerogative to change military leadership while maintaining constitutional civilian control over the armed forces (Freedman 2022).

Importantly, the Ukrainian armed forces accepted the leadership transition without institutional resistance. This outcome demonstrates the continued strength of professional military norms and the resilience of democratic civil–military relations, even under intense wartime pressure.

Strategic Incoherence

Strategic incoherence arises when political objectives, strategic guidance, and military planning become misaligned. This pathology typically occurs when political leaders articulate goals that are ambiguous, internally contradictory, or disconnected from available military capabilities and resources (Freedman 2013).

In democratic systems, strategic incoherence may result from political compromise, domestic pressures, or uncertainty regarding adversary intentions. When political and military leadership operate with different assumptions about the nature of a conflict, strategic coordination becomes more difficult.

The early stages of the Ukraine war illustrate how such divergences can emerge. Prior to the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukrainian military leadership began preparing defensive measures, including dispersing ammunition stockpiles, strengthening territorial defence units, and adjusting force deployments. At the same time, Ukrainian political leadership sought to avoid public alarm that might destabilise the economy or provoke panic among the population.

This divergence between military preparations and political messaging reflected the complex political constraints governments face when confronting imminent conflict. While military planners emphasised worst-case operational scenarios, political leaders had to balance strategic communication, economic stability, and diplomatic signalling.

As the war progressed, however, Ukraine gradually achieved stronger alignment between political objectives, military strategy, and international support. Close coordination with Western partners, particularly in intelligence sharing, military assistance, and operations planning, helped integrate battlefield operations into a broader strategic framework aimed at sustaining long-term resistance against Russian aggression (Kofman and Lee 2023).

Bureaucratic Fragmentation

Modern security governance involves a wide network of institutions, including ministries of defence, intelligence agencies, foreign affairs departments, economic authorities, and technological organisations. While this institutional diversity reflects the multidimensional nature of contemporary security challenges, it also creates risks of bureaucratic fragmentation.

Fragmentation occurs when institutions responsible for national security pursue divergent priorities, compete for resources, or operate within isolated decision-making structures (Betts 2007). Such dynamics can slow crisis response, reduce strategic coherence, and generate institutional rivalry rather than cooperation.

The Ukrainian wartime governance structure illustrates both the challenges and benefits of institutional coordination. After the Russian invasion in 2014, Ukraine implemented several reforms to strengthen cooperation among civilian authorities, regional administrations, and military institutions. These reforms included establishing territorial defence forces and developing regional civil–military administrative structures.

During the full-scale war after 2022, these institutional arrangements proved crucial for coordinating logistics, mobilising local defence units, protecting infrastructure, and maintaining continuity of government functions under wartime conditions. The Ukrainian experience demonstrates how effective civil–military integration across national and regional institutions can enhance societal resilience during large-scale conflict.

Nevertheless, wartime governance inevitably concentrates authority within executive leadership structures. While such centralization may improve decision-making speed during crises, it also illustrates the institutional tensions that prolonged wartime governance can create within democratic systems.

Civilian Micromanagement and Military Autonomy

A central dilemma in civil–military relations is balancing civilian oversight with military autonomy. Democratic governments must retain authority over national defence policy and strategic objectives. At the same time, military professionals require sufficient operational autonomy to conduct complex military operations effectively (Feaver 2003).

Excessive civilian micromanagement can undermine operational effectiveness by disrupting military command structures and limiting the flexibility needed for battlefield adaptation. Conversely, excessive military autonomy may weaken democratic oversight and reduce political accountability for the use of force.

The war in Ukraine shows how these tensions can be managed in practice. Ukrainian political leadership has retained strategic authority over major national defence decisions, including mobilisation policies, alliance coordination, and strategic war aims. At the operational level, however, Ukrainian military commanders have been granted considerable flexibility in adapting tactics and force structures to battlefield conditions.

This operational autonomy has been particularly visible in the rapid development of drone warfare, decentralised tactical operations, and cooperation between military units and civilian technological communities. Ukraine’s defence effort has benefited from close collaboration between the armed forces, private technology companies, and volunteer networks supporting battlefield innovation.

The Ukrainian case therefore illustrates how effective civil–military integration can combine centralised political direction with decentralised operational adaptation.

Democratic Erosion and Wartime Governance

The final risk concerns the potential erosion of democratic norms governing civil–military relations during prolonged conflict. Democratic systems rely on transparency, accountability, and legal oversight to ensure that military power remains subordinate to constitutional authority.

Wartime conditions inevitably place pressure on these safeguards. Emergency legislation, mobilisation measures, and wartime secrecy may limit parliamentary oversight and reduce public transparency. Such measures are often necessary for national defence but can create long-term risks if emergency powers become institutionalised.

Ukraine provides a particularly important case for examining this dynamic. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine has implemented wartime governance measures including martial law, nationwide mobilisation, and centralised wartime administration. These measures expanded executive authority and limited certain political processes during the emergency.

At the same time, Ukraine’s political system has continued to demonstrate significant democratic resilience. Parliamentary institutions remain active, civil society organisations continue to operate, and public support for democratic governance remains strong. Many observers interpret Ukraine’s wartime resistance not only as a defence of national sovereignty but also as a defence of democratic political identity.

This combination of wartime mobilisation and continued democratic legitimacy highlights the complex relationship between national survival and democratic governance during major conflicts.

Civil–military integration is essential for translating political authority into effective military capability. Yet the relationship between civilian leadership and military institutions remains inherently vulnerable to institutional distortions. Politicisation, strategic incoherence, bureaucratic fragmentation, tensions between oversight and autonomy, and pressures on democratic accountability represent recurring risks in national security governance.

The war in Ukraine provides a contemporary empirical framework for examining these dynamics under conditions of large-scale interstate warfare. Ukraine’s experience demonstrates both the challenges and resilience of democratic civil–military systems operating under extreme pressure. Leadership tensions, strategic debates, and institutional adjustments have emerged during the conflict, yet civilian control over the military and professional military norms have remained intact.

In an era of multidomain competition and prolonged geopolitical confrontation, the resilience of civil–military governance systems may ultimately prove as decisive as military capabilities themselves.

8.8. Civil–Military Integration in Wartime and Crisis

Civil–military integration becomes most visible and consequential during periods of war and national crisis. Wartime governance is the most demanding test of this relationship, as political leadership must simultaneously direct military operations, mobilise society, sustain economic activity, and maintain political legitimacy under uncertainty and strategic pressure. In such circumstances, the coordination between political leadership, military institutions, and broader society determines not only battlefield effectiveness but also the endurance of the state itself. Wartime governance accordingly requires the rapid alignment of political objectives, military operations, economic mobilisation, and societal resilience (Freedman 2013).

The ongoing war in Ukraine provides an especially relevant case for examining the dynamics of civil–military integration during high-intensity conflict. Since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukraine has faced the challenge of sustaining national resistance against a materially superior adversary while preserving democratic governance and international legitimacy. The Ukrainian experience illustrates how civil–military integration can evolve under wartime conditions through institutional adaptation, societal mobilisation, political legitimacy, and strategic communication.

These dimensions demonstrate that modern warfare is not determined solely by military capability. Rather, the effectiveness of civil–military governance often shapes a state’s ability to mobilise resources, maintain public support, and sustain strategic coherence during prolonged conflict. In this sense, wartime civil–military integration becomes a central determinant of national strategic endurance.

Adaptation under Pressure

War places extraordinary pressure on institutions, requiring rapid adaptation across political, military, and administrative structures. Civil–military integration plays a critical role in enabling such adaptation, as political leadership must coordinate strategic priorities while military institutions adjust operational doctrine, command arrangements, and force structures in response to evolving battlefield conditions.

The Ukrainian armed forces demonstrated significant institutional adaptability during the first year of the full-scale invasion. Early Russian planning assumed that Ukrainian command structures would collapse rapidly under the shock of the initial assault. Instead, Ukrainian military leadership maintained decentralised operational control, enabling local commanders to respond quickly and flexibly to changing battlefield conditions (Kofman and Lee 2023). This decentralised approach increased operational agility and reduced the vulnerability of Ukrainian command structures to disruption.

This flexibility was partly the result of reforms implemented after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. During the intervening years, Ukraine undertook substantial efforts to professionalise its armed forces, improve interoperability with NATO structures, and strengthen the authority of operational-level commanders. These reforms contributed to the development of a more resilient command system capable of operating under the conditions of modern high-intensity warfare (Watling and Reynolds 2022).

Political leadership also demonstrated adaptability by coordinating military operations with diplomatic initiatives and international support. Close cooperation with Western partners enabled Ukraine to integrate intelligence sharing, advanced weapons systems, and training programs into its broader war effort. This alignment between political leadership, military command, and international partnerships shows how wartime adaptation often depends on effective civil–military coordination across multiple institutional levels. The Ukrainian case therefore shows that institutional flexibility and coordinated governance structures are essential to sustaining military effectiveness during prolonged conflict.

Mobilisation and National Resilience

Large-scale war requires mobilising not only armed forces but society as a whole. Civil–military integration therefore extends beyond traditional defence institutions to encompass economic production, infrastructure protection, technological innovation, and civilian participation in national defence.

Ukraine's experience demonstrates the central role of societal mobilisation in modern warfare. Following the invasion in February 2022, Ukraine rapidly expanded its territorial defence forces, enabling civilian volunteers to participate in local defence and support military operations. These formations became an important component of Ukraine's broader defence architecture, complementing regular armed forces and contributing to the defence of key urban centres during the early stages of the war (Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskyi 2023).

At the same time, Ukrainian society mobilised extensive volunteer networks supporting military logistics, humanitarian assistance, and technological innovation. Civilian engineers, entrepreneurs, and volunteer organisations played a particularly important role in developing unmanned aerial systems, battlefield communications tools, and electronic warfare adaptations.

This integration between civilian initiative and military requirements illustrates the broader concept of national resilience. In contemporary warfare, the effectiveness of armed forces increasingly depends on societies' ability to sustain prolonged mobilisation while maintaining economic functionality and political stability. Ukraine's experience demonstrates that national resilience emerges from the interaction between state institutions, civil society, and military organisations working toward shared strategic objectives.

Political Legitimacy and Wartime Endurance

Political legitimacy represents another critical dimension of civil–military integration during wartime. Sustained military resistance requires public confidence in political leadership and a

shared understanding of the conflict's strategic objectives. When political legitimacy erodes, military effectiveness may decline as public support for mobilisation and sacrifice weakens.

The Ukrainian case illustrates the importance of political legitimacy in sustaining national resistance. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian political leadership has maintained strong domestic public support while successfully mobilising international diplomatic and military assistance. President Volodymyr Zelensky emerged as a central symbol of national resistance, reinforcing the perception that Ukraine's defence represents not only a territorial struggle but also a defence of democratic political identity.

This legitimacy has played a critical role in sustaining wartime endurance. Public willingness to accept economic hardship, infrastructure disruption, and prolonged mobilisation reflects a strong alignment between political leadership, military objectives, and societal expectations. Such alignment significantly enhances the strategic resilience of a state under external attack (Freedman and Williams 2023).

At the same time, maintaining political legitimacy during wartime requires continuous engagement with both domestic audiences and international partners. Ukrainian leadership has thus combined military resistance with diplomatic outreach aimed at sustaining international coalition support. The Ukrainian experience demonstrates that political legitimacy functions as a strategic resource, enabling states to sustain long-term resistance under extreme pressure.

Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is another essential component of civil–military integration in modern warfare. In the contemporary information environment, governments must communicate effectively with domestic populations, international partners, and adversaries in order to shape perceptions of the conflict and sustain political support.

Ukraine's strategic communication strategy has been widely recognised as a critical element of its wartime governance. Ukrainian leadership employed digital media, international diplomacy, and coordinated public messaging to maintain global attention on the war and reinforce narratives of national resistance and democratic legitimacy (Ekman and Nilsson 2023). Through frequent public addresses, international media engagement, and digital diplomacy, Ukrainian officials kept the conflict highly visible in the global information environment.

This communication strategy also helped coordinate political leadership and military institutions. Political leaders, military officials, and diplomatic representatives communicated consistent strategic narratives emphasising Ukraine's determination to defend sovereignty while appealing for continued international support.

Strategic communication therefore functions as an extension of civil–military integration in the informational domain. Effective communication strengthens societal resilience, reinforces alliance cohesion, and shapes international perceptions of the conflict environment. The Ukrainian case illustrates how the information dimension of warfare has become closely intertwined with political leadership and military strategy.

Civil–military integration during wartime extends far beyond traditional command relationships between political authorities and military institutions. Effective wartime governance requires the integration of military operations with societal mobilization, political legitimacy, and strategic communication.

The war in Ukraine demonstrates how civil–military systems can adapt under extreme pressure. Institutional reforms, societal resilience, and strong political leadership enabled Ukraine to

sustain resistance against a larger adversary while maintaining democratic governance and international legitimacy.

These experiences highlight a broader lesson for contemporary security governance: in modern conflicts, national endurance often depends as much on effective civil–military integration as on the battlefield performance of armed forces. In an era of multidomain warfare and prolonged geopolitical competition, states' capacity to integrate political authority, military capability, and societal resilience may ultimately determine strategic success.

Conclusion

The preceding sections of this chapter have examined civil–military integration as a central component of modern security governance. Contemporary military power cannot be understood solely through the lens of force structure, technological capability, or battlefield performance. Rather, the effectiveness of military institutions increasingly depends on the broader governance systems that connect political leadership, military command, economic resources, and societal support. In this sense, civil–military integration represents a foundational element of strategic effectiveness in modern warfare.

Historically, the relationship between civilian authorities and military institutions has been framed primarily as a question of democratic control over the armed forces. While civilian control remains essential, the strategic environment of the twenty-first century requires a broader perspective. Civil–military integration today encompasses not only the hierarchical relationship between political leaders and military commanders but also the coordination of multiple instruments of national power across political, economic, informational, technological, and societal domains.

Modern conflicts increasingly require integrating military operations with diplomatic initiatives, economic measures, technological innovation, and strategic communication. Effective governance structures, therefore, serve as the connective framework through which these instruments of power align with national strategic objectives. Without such coordination, even technologically advanced military forces may struggle to achieve durable strategic outcomes.

The analysis of wartime governance, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, highlights the importance of this broader conception of civil–military integration. Ukraine's experience shows that strategic effectiveness depends not only on battlefield performance but also on political leadership's ability to mobilise society, sustain political legitimacy, coordinate international support, and maintain institutional resilience under prolonged conflict. These factors collectively contribute to what may be described as national strategic endurance.

Civil–military integration also plays a critical role in maintaining the legitimacy of the use of force. Democratic systems derive strategic strength not only from military capability but also from the perceived legitimacy of their political institutions and strategic objectives. When political leadership, military institutions, and society share a common understanding of the purpose and conduct of military operations, the resulting alignment strengthens national cohesion and enhances the sustainability of long-term strategic commitments (Freedman and Williams 2023).

Closely related to legitimacy is the concept of resilience. Modern warfare increasingly targets not only military forces but also economic infrastructure, information systems, and civilian populations. As a result, states' ability to sustain political stability, economic activity, and societal cohesion during conflict has become a decisive factor in strategic competition. Civil–

military integration provides the institutional framework through which such resilience can be organised and sustained.

Finally, effective civil–military integration contributes directly to deterrence. Credible deterrence depends not only on the existence of military capabilities but also on the adversary’s perception that a state has the political unity, institutional capacity, and societal resolve to employ those capabilities effectively. When political leadership, military institutions, and society operate in alignment, the resulting coherence strengthens deterrence by signalling strategic resolve and governance stability (Gray 2010a).

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that civil–military integration should be understood not merely as an institutional arrangement but as a strategic system that connects governance, military capability, and national resilience. In the complex strategic environment of the twenty-first century, this system's effectiveness may prove as important as the technological sophistication of military forces themselves.

The importance of civil–military integration becomes even more pronounced as warfare continues to evolve. Emerging technologies, MDOs, and the increasing interdependence between military and civilian systems are transforming the character of conflict. Future wars are likely to involve deeper integration between military operations, technological innovation, economic competition, and information campaigns. Understanding how governance structures adapt to these changes becomes essential for analysing the future of military power. The next chapter explores how technological transformation, MDOs, and evolving strategic competition are reshaping the character of warfare and the requirements placed on national security institutions.

9. MEASURING MILITARY POWER

The preceding chapters have examined the nature, functions, and institutional foundations of military power in contemporary strategy. Military force was analysed not merely as a collection of weapons and personnel but as a complex instrument embedded within political institutions, technological systems, alliance structures, and societal resilience. In the multidomain environment of contemporary strategic competition, military power operates through interconnected systems that combine physical capabilities, informational networks, and institutional coordination. Understanding the role of military force in international politics therefore requires more than describing military institutions or strategic doctrines. It also requires a systematic approach to evaluating how military capabilities are generated, sustained, and employed.

Assessing military power has long been central to strategic analysis. Governments, military planners, and intelligence agencies continuously evaluate the capabilities of potential adversaries and allies to inform defence planning, deterrence strategies, and alliance commitments. These assessments influence decisions about military modernisation, force posture, and resource allocation. At the same time, inaccurate evaluations of military capability have historically contributed to strategic miscalculation, deterrence failure, and unexpected war outcomes. The ability to assess military power accurately hence represents a fundamental requirement of effective strategy.

Despite its importance, measuring military power is inherently difficult. Unlike economic output or demographic size, military capability cannot be captured through a single quantitative indicator. While defence spending, personnel numbers, and equipment inventories provide valuable information about the scale of military resources, these metrics reveal little about how effectively those resources translate into operational performance. Military effectiveness depends on a wide range of qualitative factors including doctrine, training, leadership, organisational culture, and the ability to integrate complex technological systems. As Stephen Biddle (2004) argues, battlefield effectiveness arises from the interaction between material capabilities and the methods military organisations use to employ them.

The difficulty of measurement is further compounded by the strategic context in which military power operates. Geography, alliance structures, logistical capacity, and political will all influence how military forces can be deployed and sustained. A state with large armed forces may nonetheless struggle to project power beyond its borders, while smaller states embedded in strong alliance networks may possess substantial collective capabilities. Moreover, modern military systems increasingly depend on technological infrastructures, such as satellite networks, digital communications, and advanced data processing, that traditional metrics struggle to quantify.

Contemporary strategic competition adds another layer of complexity. Emerging technologies, including AI, cyber capabilities, autonomous systems, and space-based infrastructure, are transforming how military power is generated and employed. These technologies often operate within highly classified environments, making reliable external assessment challenging. As a result, analysts must often evaluate military capability under incomplete information and significant uncertainty.

This chapter examines the methodological challenges associated with assessing military power and proposes a framework for evaluating military capabilities in contemporary strategic analysis. It begins by exploring the conceptual difficulties involved in measuring military power and the distinction between material capacity and operational effectiveness. The chapter then

analyses the principal quantitative and qualitative dimensions of military capability, including defence spending, force structure, doctrine, training, and organisational effectiveness. Subsequent sections consider the role of geography, alliance networks, perception, and emerging technologies in shaping the strategic value of military capabilities.

Taken together, these dimensions demonstrate that military power cannot be understood as a simple aggregation of weapons or personnel. Rather, it represents a multidimensional system whose effectiveness emerges from the interaction of material resources, institutional competence, strategic environment, and political will. Understanding how these elements interact is essential for evaluating contemporary military balances and anticipating the future evolution of strategic competition.

9.1. The Problem of Measuring Military Power

Measuring military power remains a persistent challenge in strategic studies. Analysts, policymakers, and military planners frequently seek to compare the capabilities of different states to assess the balance of power, anticipate potential conflicts, and evaluate deterrence relationships. Yet such comparisons often rely on imperfect indicators that capture only some of the factors that determine military effectiveness.

At its most basic level, military power refers to a state's ability to employ organised force to pursue political objectives. This capacity depends on a combination of resources, institutions, and strategic context. Traditional assessments of military power have often emphasised material factors such as the size of armed forces, the number of major weapons platforms, or the level of defence expenditure. While these indicators offer useful insights into the scale of military resources available to a state, they only partially represent actual combat effectiveness.

A central conceptual challenge is distinguishing between military capacity and military effectiveness. Capacity refers to the material resources available to a military organisation, including personnel, equipment, and financial investment. Effectiveness, by contrast, reflects those resources' ability to produce successful operational outcomes. A military force may possess substantial material capacity but still perform poorly in combat if it suffers from inadequate training, flawed doctrine, or weak leadership.

History shows that material superiority does not guarantee battlefield success. In several major conflicts, numerically inferior forces have defeated materially stronger opponents through superior doctrine, organisation, and operational adaptation. Stephen Biddle's analysis of modern warfare (2004) emphasises that military effectiveness depends heavily on adopting effective tactical and operational methods, particularly those designed to mitigate the lethality of modern firepower. Similarly, studies of military effectiveness by Murray and Millett (1996) highlight the importance of institutional factors such as leadership, PME, and organisational learning in determining battlefield performance.

Another complication arises from the difficulty of obtaining reliable information about military capabilities. Governments deliberately conceal many aspects of military power, such as readiness levels, operations planning, and technological integration, for security reasons. Intelligence agencies attempt to estimate these variables through a combination of open-source analysis, technical intelligence, and classified assessments, but significant uncertainty often remains. As a result, strategic evaluations often involve judgments made under incomplete information.

The multidimensional character of military power further complicates measurement. Military capability is influenced not only by internal characteristics of armed forces but also by the

broader strategic environment in which those forces operate. Geographic factors such as distance, terrain, and access to strategic bases can significantly affect the ability of states to deploy and sustain military operations. Similarly, alliance networks may amplify or constrain national capabilities by integrating multiple national forces into collective defence structures.

Political factors also play an essential role. Military forces ultimately operate under political leadership, and governments' and societies' willingness to use force can significantly shape the strategic balance. States with substantial military resources may hesitate to use them because of domestic political constraints or alliance considerations, while other states may be more willing to accept risks in pursuit of strategic objectives.

These complexities illustrate why military power cannot be reduced to a single metric or index. Quantitative indicators such as defence spending or equipment inventories provide valuable information about material resources, but they must be interpreted within a broader analytical framework that accounts for institutional competence, strategic context, and political factors. Effective assessment then requires combining quantitative data with qualitative analysis of doctrine, training, leadership, and organisational effectiveness.

Recognising these challenges does not render measurement impossible. Rather, it highlights the need for multidimensional approaches that integrate diverse sources of information and analytical perspectives. Strategic analysts must accordingly evaluate military capability as a dynamic system in which material, institutional, and contextual factors interact to produce operational outcomes.

The following sections examine these dimensions in greater detail. The next section focuses on quantitative measures of military power, including defence spending, force structure, and industrial capacity, while also highlighting the limitations of purely statistical comparisons. Subsequent sections explore qualitative factors, geographic constraints, alliance dynamics, and emerging technological developments that increasingly shape the effectiveness of modern armed forces.

9.2. Quantitative Measures of Military Power

Quantitative indicators represent the most widely used tools for comparing military power across states. Governments, research institutions, and international organisations routinely compile statistics on defence expenditures, personnel strength, and weapons inventories to estimate the relative scale of national military capabilities. Such metrics provide valuable insights into the material foundations of military power and enable analysts to identify long-term trends in military modernisation and force development.

Two institutions in particular provide the most widely used global datasets for quantitative assessments of military capability: the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)² and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)³. Their annual publications, SIPRI Yearbook and The Military Balance, compile standardised data on military expenditures, force structures, equipment inventories, and defence trends, making them central reference points for scholars, policymakers, and defence analysts.

SIPRI's military expenditure database tracks defence spending across states over time, while the IISS Military Balance provides detailed assessments of global force structures, equipment

² Yearbook can be found on the SIPRI webpage: <https://www.sipri.org/>

³ The Military Balance can be found on the IISS web page: <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/>

inventories, and military capabilities. Together, these datasets form an important empirical foundation for contemporary analysis of military power.

Despite their importance, quantitative measures require careful interpretation. Raw statistics reveal the scale of military resources but do not necessarily indicate how effectively those resources translate into operational capability. Differences in training, doctrine, readiness, and organisational competence often produce significant variation in battlefield performance among forces that appear similar when measured through purely statistical indicators. As a result, quantitative assessments are an essential starting point for analysis but cannot capture the full complexity of military effectiveness on their own.

This section examines three principal quantitative dimensions of military power: defence spending, force structure and equipment inventories, and the industrial capacity that sustains military operations over time.

Defence Spending

Defence expenditure is often treated as the most visible indicator of military power. The resources allocated to national defence influence the size of armed forces, the procurement of advanced technologies, the maintenance of equipment, and the development of military infrastructure. Consequently, comparisons of defence spending frequently serve as an initial proxy for assessing relative military capability.

Global defence spending has increased significantly in recent years as geopolitical competition intensifies. According to SIPRI, worldwide military expenditure surpassed two trillion dollars in the early 2020s, reflecting growing investments in modernisation programs, emerging technologies, and expanded force structures. Major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia account for a substantial share of this spending, while many European states have increased defence budgets in response to the deteriorating security environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

However, the analytical value of defence spending statistics depends heavily on how analysts interpret those figures. One important distinction is between absolute spending levels and defence expenditure as a share of national economic output. Large economies may spend vast sums on defence while allocating a relatively modest proportion of their national resources to military purposes. Conversely, smaller states facing acute security threats may devote a higher share of national income to defence despite limited overall resources.

Another complication arises from differences in purchasing power and cost structures. The same amount of financial expenditure may produce different levels of military capability depending on domestic labour costs, procurement systems, and industrial efficiency. States with lower production costs may generate larger forces for a given expenditure level, while others may invest heavily in advanced technologies that increase capability without necessarily expanding force size.

Moreover, defence budgets do not always fully capture the resources devoted to military activities. Some states maintain off-budget funding mechanisms, state-owned defence industries, or classified expenditures that complicate transparent accounting. As a result, analysts must often rely on estimates when comparing national defence spending.

For these reasons, defence expenditure should be viewed not as a definitive measure of military capability but as an indicator of strategic prioritisation and potential resource availability. The effectiveness with which financial resources are converted into operational capability depends

on broader institutional and organisational factors that extend beyond simple budgetary comparisons.

Force Structure and Equipment

Another commonly used method for assessing military power involves analysing the size and composition of national armed forces. Force structure encompasses personnel numbers, the organisation of military units, and inventories of major weapon systems such as aircraft, armoured vehicles, naval vessels, and missile systems. Data on these variables provide insight into how states allocate resources among different military domains and operational missions.

The IISS Military Balance remains one of the most widely cited sources for such assessments, offering detailed estimates of global force structures and equipment inventories. These data allow analysts to compare the scale of national forces and to identify shifts in military modernisation programs across regions.

However, as with defence spending, force structure statistics have limited analytical value in isolation. Numerical comparisons of equipment inventories often fail to capture critical differences in technological sophistication, readiness, and integration within broader command-and-control systems. For example, counting the number of aircraft in national inventories does not reveal whether those aircraft are operationally ready, whether pilots receive sufficient training, or whether the aircraft are integrated into effective surveillance and targeting networks.

History repeatedly demonstrates the limits of purely numerical comparisons. During the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq possessed one of the largest armies in the world in terms of personnel and equipment. Yet coalition forces rapidly defeated Iraqi units due to superior training, command systems, intelligence integration, and precision-strike capabilities. Similarly, the early phases of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 revealed that numerical superiority in armoured vehicles and artillery did not translate automatically into operational success. Organisational weaknesses, logistical failures, and command-structure deficiencies significantly limited the effectiveness of Russian forces despite their material advantages.

These examples highlight the distinction between force size and force effectiveness. Large inventories of military equipment may indicate potential capacity, but their strategic value depends on readiness levels, maintenance standards, and integration with other elements of military power.

Industrial Capacity and Sustained Military Power

Beyond budgets and force structures, a state's ability to sustain military operations over time depends heavily on its defence industrial base. Industrial capacity determines how quickly states can replace losses, produce munitions, and expand military production during periods of conflict. Historically, industrial mobilisation has played a decisive role in shaping the outcomes of major wars, particularly during prolonged, high-intensity conflicts.

Industrial capacity has re-emerged as a central issue in contemporary strategic competition. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that modern high-intensity warfare consumes enormous quantities of ammunition, missiles, and military equipment. Artillery consumption rates on the Ukrainian battlefield have far exceeded the prewar production capacity of many Western defence industries, prompting renewed efforts to expand manufacturing output and strengthen supply chains (Watling and Reynolds 2023b).

These developments highlight the importance of defence production ecosystems that integrate government procurement systems, private defence industries, and advanced technological

research. Modern military capabilities depend on complex supply chains involving specialised components such as semiconductors, advanced materials, and precision manufacturing processes. Disruptions in these supply chains can significantly affect military readiness and operational sustainability.

Industrial capacity therefore represents a critical but often underappreciated dimension of military power. States that can mobilise large-scale industrial production during crises gain a significant strategic advantage in prolonged conflicts. Conversely, reliance on fragile supply chains or limited production capacity may constrain states' ability to sustain military operations over extended periods.

Transition to Qualitative Factors

Quantitative indicators such as defence spending, force structure, and industrial capacity provide valuable insights into the material foundations of military power. They reveal the scale of resources available to military organisations and allow analysts to identify long-term trends in military modernisation.

However, these indicators cannot fully explain why some military forces perform more effectively than others under comparable material conditions. Differences in doctrine, training, leadership, and organisational culture often play a decisive role in determining battlefield outcomes. Consequently, a comprehensive assessment of military power must complement quantitative analysis with a deeper examination of the qualitative dimensions of military effectiveness.

The next section examines the institutional and organisational factors that shape how military resources translate into operational performance. These qualitative dimensions, including doctrine, training, and leadership, are critical determinants of military effectiveness that statistical indicators alone cannot capture.

9.3. Qualitative Dimensions of Military Effectiveness

While quantitative indicators provide insight into the material foundations of military power, they cannot fully explain how military forces perform in practice. Differences in doctrine, training, leadership, and organisational culture often produce substantial variation in battlefield effectiveness among forces that appear comparable in terms of equipment and personnel. As a result, qualitative dimensions of military capability play a decisive role in determining whether military resources are translated into operational success.

Scholars of military effectiveness have long emphasised the importance of institutional and organisational factors in shaping combat performance. Studies by Murray and Millett (1996) demonstrate that the effectiveness of armed forces depends heavily on leadership quality, PME, and the ability of military institutions to learn and adapt in response to changing operational. Similarly, Stephen Biddle (2004) argues that modern battlefield effectiveness depends not simply on possessing advanced weapons but on adopting effective operational methods that integrate firepower, manoeuvre, concealment, and combined-arms coordination.

These insights suggest that military capability is an institutional phenomenon rather than a purely material one. Armed forces operate as complex organisations whose effectiveness depends on the interaction of doctrine, training systems, leadership structures, and professional norms. The following subsections examine three particularly important qualitative dimensions of military effectiveness: doctrinal development, training and professionalisation, and leadership and morale.

Doctrine and Operational Concepts

Doctrine represents the intellectual foundation of military organisations. It provides a framework for understanding how military forces should be organised, deployed, and employed to achieve strategic objectives. Doctrinal concepts guide decisions about force structure, operations planning, and integrating different military capabilities within combined operations.

Barry Posen's influential analysis of military doctrine highlights the role of organisational learning and strategic context in shaping doctrinal development. According to Posen (1984), states develop military doctrines in response to perceived threats, technological opportunities, and institutional preferences within military organisations. Effective doctrines enable armed forces to anticipate the character of future conflicts and to structure their capabilities accordingly.

Historical examples demonstrate the strategic significance of doctrinal innovation. The German development of Blitzkrieg during the interwar period combined mechanised manoeuvre, air support, and decentralised command structures to create a highly effective operational concept for rapid offensive warfare. Similarly, Soviet military thinkers developed the concept of deep battle, emphasising coordinated operations across multiple echelons to disrupt adversary defences and achieve operational breakthroughs.

As strategic environments evolve, doctrinal innovation continues to shape military effectiveness. Concepts such as MDOs and joint all-domain command architectures reflect modern armed forces' efforts to integrate capabilities across land, maritime, air, cyber, and space domains. These doctrinal developments seek to enable coordinated action across increasingly complex operating environments.

The war in Ukraine illustrates the importance of doctrinal adaptation in contemporary warfare. Ukrainian forces have demonstrated considerable flexibility in integrating traditional manoeuvre warfare with emerging technologies such as unmanned aerial systems, digital communication networks, and precision artillery targeting. This adaptive approach contrasts with more rigid doctrinal practices observed in some Russian formations during the early phases of the conflict (Watling and Reynolds 2023a).

Training and Professionalism

Training systems and PME constitute another essential dimension of military effectiveness. Even well-designed doctrines cannot be implemented successfully without personnel who can execute complex operational concepts under conditions of uncertainty and stress.

Professional military training serves several functions. It develops technical proficiency in operating advanced equipment, fosters tactical competence in unit-level operations, and prepares officers and non-commissioned officers to make decisions in rapidly evolving battlefield environments. Effective training systems emphasise realistic exercises, joint interoperability, and decentralised decision-making that empowers subordinate commanders to adapt to changing circumstances.

Stephen Biddle's analysis of modern warfare (2004) highlights the importance of training in enabling forces to employ complex tactical methods effectively. Modern combat environments characterised by precision firepower and advanced surveillance technologies require soldiers and officers to operate with discipline, coordination, and situational awareness. Without rigorous training and PME, even technologically advanced forces may struggle to translate equipment advantages into battlefield success.

The development of the professional non-commissioned officer corps represents a particularly important institutional factor. Many Western armed forces emphasise experienced NCOs in maintaining discipline, implementing tactical orders, and providing small-unit leadership. This decentralised leadership structure supports mission command, which encourages initiative and flexibility among subordinate commanders.

By contrast, armed forces characterised by rigid hierarchies or limited professional development opportunities may struggle to adapt effectively in dynamic combat environments. Weak training systems, corruption in promotion structures, or insufficient investment in PME can undermine the operational effectiveness of otherwise well-equipped forces.

Recent battlefield observations in Ukraine again illustrate these dynamics. Ukrainian forces have benefited from extensive training programs with NATO members since 2014, which emphasised decentralised command practices, joint operations, and professional leadership development. These reforms helped Ukrainian units operate flexibly and adapt to rapidly changing battlefield conditions after Russia's 2022 invasion.

Leadership and Morale

Leadership and morale represent the human dimension of military effectiveness. Even well-trained and well-equipped forces may perform poorly if leadership structures are ineffective or if soldiers lack motivation and confidence in their mission.

Military leadership operates at multiple levels. Strategic leadership determines the overall direction of military operations and ensures coordination between political objectives and military strategy. Operational leadership organises campaigns and allocates resources across theatres of conflict. Tactical leadership shapes unit performance in direct combat environments. Leadership quality at each level can significantly influence battlefield outcomes.

Effective leadership depends on competence, credibility, and the ability to inspire trust among subordinates. Leaders must interpret complex operating environments, make decisions under uncertainty, and maintain cohesion within their units. Military organisations that promote leaders based on merit and professional competence tend to perform more effectively than those where promotions depend primarily on political loyalty or patronage networks.

Morale is closely connected to leadership and organisational culture. Soldiers who believe in the legitimacy of their mission, trust their commanders, and maintain strong unit cohesion are generally more resilient under combat conditions. Conversely, low morale can undermine discipline, reduce initiative, and weaken military units' ability to sustain operations during prolonged conflict.

The contrast between Ukrainian and Russian forces during the early stages of the 2022 invasion again illustrates the strategic significance of morale and leadership. Ukrainian forces defending their homeland showed high motivation and cohesion, while reports from Russian units frequently described inadequate leadership, unclear objectives, and low morale among conscripts. These differences significantly influenced operational outcomes despite Russia's larger military resources.

The qualitative dimensions examined in this section demonstrate that military capability cannot be understood solely through quantitative indicators. Doctrine, training systems, leadership structures, and organisational culture fundamentally shape how militaries employ resources in practice. Forces that successfully integrate these institutional elements can often achieve operational effectiveness even when facing adversaries with greater material resources.

For this reason, analysts assessing military power must evaluate not only the scale of military forces but also the institutional systems that sustain them. Understanding the qualitative foundations of military effectiveness therefore complements quantitative measures of defence spending, force structure, and industrial capacity.

However, even well-trained and well-led military forces do not operate in a vacuum. The broader strategic environment also influences their effectiveness, including geographic constraints, logistical requirements, and access to strategic infrastructure. Terrain, distance, and physical geography shape the conditions under which military organisations apply doctrine, training, and technology.

The next section accordingly examines how geography and operational context shape the practical utility of military power, and how the interaction between terrain, operating environments, and emerging technologies increasingly influences the effectiveness of modern armed forces.

9.4. Geography and the Operational Context

Geography has long played a fundamental role in shaping the conduct of warfare. Distance, terrain, climate, and access to strategic infrastructure influence how military forces can be deployed, sustained, and employed in combat operations. These geographic factors affect logistics, mobility, and the relative advantages of offensive and defensive strategies. For this reason, assessments of military power must consider not only the size and quality of armed forces but also the geographic environments in which those forces are expected to operate.

However, geography's influence on military operations is not static. Advances in surveillance systems, precision-guided weapons, and unmanned platforms are increasingly modifying how terrain shapes battlefield dynamics. Modern military effectiveness, therefore, depends not only on geographic conditions but also on military organisations' ability to integrate technologies that alter visibility, mobility, and targeting across different operating environments.

Classical strategic thinkers recognised geography's enduring influence on military power. Alfred Thayer Mahan emphasised the strategic importance of maritime geography and sea lines of communication in shaping global power projection, while Halford Mackinder highlighted the geopolitical significance of continental land power and strategic depth (Erickson 2020). Although contemporary warfare increasingly involves technological and informational domains, geographic constraints still shape how militaries organise and employ their capabilities.

Modern military operations rely heavily on logistical networks, transportation infrastructure, and access to strategic bases. Even technologically advanced armed forces must transport personnel, equipment, and supplies across potentially vast distances to sustain military operations. Geography consequently interacts with logistics and force structure to shape the operational reach of military power. The following subsections examine three key geographic dimensions affecting military capability: distance and logistics, terrain and operating environments, and the strategic distinction between maritime and continental powers.

Distance, Logistics, and Power Projection

Distance represents one of the most fundamental constraints on military operations. States' ability to project military power beyond their immediate territory depends heavily on transportation capacity, logistical infrastructure, and access to forward bases. Even states with

large and technologically advanced armed forces may face significant challenges when operating far from their national territory.

Power projection requires a complex network of logistical capabilities including strategic airlift, sealift, fuel supply systems, and pre-positioned equipment. These systems enable military forces to deploy rapidly to distant theatres and to sustain operations over extended periods. Without reliable logistical support, military units cannot maintain operational tempo or replace losses during prolonged campaigns.

The United States provides a prominent example of how logistical infrastructure enables global military reach. Through an extensive network of overseas bases, allied partnerships, and strategic transportation assets, the United States maintains the capacity to deploy forces rapidly across multiple regions. This global basing structure significantly enhances the operational flexibility of U.S. military power and supports alliance commitments across Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East.

Conversely, states lacking robust power-projection infrastructure may struggle to employ military force beyond their immediate geographic region. Even major powers must carefully consider logistical constraints when planning large-scale operations. The Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrated how logistical shortcomings can undermine military campaigns. Russian forces faced significant supply challenges in the early phases of the war, including difficulty maintaining fuel, ammunition, and maintenance support for forward-deployed units. These logistical limitations constrained operational momentum and contributed to the failure of initial offensive objectives.

Distance therefore acts as both a physical and organisational constraint on military power. States seeking to project force globally must invest not only in combat capabilities but also in the logistical systems that sustain them.

Terrain and Operating Environment

The physical characteristics of the operating environment strongly influence how military operations are conducted. Terrain shapes movement, visibility, and the effectiveness of different military technologies. As a result, armed forces must adapt their doctrine, equipment, and tactics to the geographic conditions in which they expect to operate.

Mountainous terrain often favours defenders by restricting manoeuvre and limiting the effectiveness of large, mechanised formations. Narrow valleys and elevated positions allow defending forces to control key routes of advance and complicate the use of heavy equipment. Historical conflicts in regions such as Afghanistan illustrate the challenges conventional forces face in mountainous environments where mobility and logistics are constrained.

Desert environments present a different set of operational challenges. Open terrain may favour mechanised manoeuvre and long-range firepower, but extreme temperatures and limited infrastructure impose significant logistical demands. Military operations in desert regions require reliable supply chains that can sustain fuel, water, and maintenance support under difficult conditions.

Urban environments represent another increasingly significant battlefield context. As global urbanisation continues, many potential conflict zones involve densely populated cities. Urban terrain restricts visibility, complicates the use of heavy firepower, and increases the risk of civilian casualties. Military forces operating in urban environments must adapt to complex three-dimensional battlefields involving subterranean infrastructure, dense building structures, and large civilian populations.

Recent combat operations in Ukraine demonstrate how technological developments are modifying traditional assumptions about terrain. Large areas of open agricultural terrain in eastern and southern Ukraine have proven highly exposed to persistent surveillance from drones, satellites, and other reconnaissance systems. The widespread use of UAVs, loitering munitions, and precision-guided artillery has significantly increased the vulnerability of manoeuvring forces operating in open terrain (Watling and Reynolds 2023b).

Integrating drone-based reconnaissance with real-time targeting and long-range fires has contributed to what some analysts describe as a “transparent battlespace.” In such environments, persistent surveillance networks can often detect and rapidly target concentrations of forces, logistical movements, and defensive positions. As a result, terrain that historically favoured large-scale mechanised manoeuvre may increasingly expose forces to continuous observation and attack. The combination of persistent surveillance, unmanned systems, and precision fires may consequently be gradually eroding some of the traditional advantages associated with manoeuvre warfare in open terrain (Watling and Reynolds 2023b). These developments illustrate how technological innovation can modify the operational significance of geography, altering the conditions under which military effectiveness is achieved on the battlefield.

At the same time, urban environments such as Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and Bakhmut have produced prolonged and highly destructive battles characterised by attritional combat and complex tactical engagements. Dense urban terrain provides concealment and protection against surveillance and long-range fires, but it also increases the difficulty of manoeuvre, logistics, and command coordination.

These developments illustrate that the operational impact of terrain cannot be understood independently of technological change. Geography continues to shape warfare, but emerging technologies such as drones, satellite surveillance, and precision fires increasingly modify how terrain influences battlefield dynamics.

Maritime and Continental Strategic Orientations

Geography also shapes states' broader strategic orientations and the composition of their military forces. States with extensive coastlines and maritime trade networks often prioritise naval power to protect sea lines of communication and maintain access to global markets. Maritime powers typically emphasise naval fleets, amphibious capabilities, and long-range airpower designed to operate across large oceanic spaces.

Alfred Thayer Mahan's theory of sea power highlighted the strategic significance of controlling maritime trade routes and maintaining naval superiority. Although developed in the context of nineteenth-century geopolitics, Mahan's insights remain relevant in contemporary strategic competition. Control of maritime chokepoints, protection of commercial shipping routes, and the ability to project naval power remain central components of global military strategy.

By contrast, states situated in continental environments often prioritise large land forces and strategic depth. Halford Mackinder's concept of the Eurasian “heartland” emphasised the strategic advantages associated with vast land territories capable of supporting large armies and absorbing external invasion. Continental powers frequently emphasise armoured formations, artillery, and territorial defence systems designed to operate across expansive land theatres.

These geographic orientations still shape modern force structures. The United States and several allied states maintain strong naval and expeditionary capabilities reflecting their maritime orientation. China's military modernisation includes significant naval expansion to secure maritime interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Meanwhile, Russia historically emphasises land-

based military power supported by strategic depth across Eurasia. In practice, most modern states must balance maritime, land, and air capabilities within integrated joint force structures. Nevertheless, geographic location continues to shape strategic priorities and defence planning decisions.

Geography remains a fundamental determinant of military capability despite the technological transformations of modern warfare. Distance, terrain, and access to strategic infrastructure influence how military forces deploy, sustain, and employ themselves in conflict. Even technologically advanced armed forces must adapt their strategies to geographic realities that shape operating environments and logistical constraints.

For this reason, assessments of military power must consider not only material resources and institutional quality but also the geographic context in which those forces operate. Military capabilities that appear formidable in abstract comparisons may prove difficult to employ effectively under unfavourable geographic conditions. Geography also interacts with alliance networks and international basing arrangements that enable states to extend their operational reach. The next section accordingly examines how alliances and coalition structures function as multipliers of military power by integrating national capabilities into broader strategic systems.

9.5. Alliances as Multipliers of Military Power

States rarely exercise military power in isolation. Alliances significantly affect the balance of military capability by integrating multiple states' resources into collective defence structures. Consequently, assessments of military power must consider not only national capabilities but also the alliance networks within which those capabilities operate. From a measurement perspective, alliances influence military capability in three principal ways: expanding the available force pool, enhancing operational integration, and strengthening deterrence credibility.

Interoperability and Collective Capability

Alliances increase effective military power by integrating national forces into multinational operational structures. Interoperability supported by shared communication systems, standardised procedures, and coordinated training allows allied forces to operate as a unified military system.

NATO provides the clearest example of this integration. Its integrated command structures, joint exercises, and standardised procedures enable forces from multiple member states to operate together in multinational operations. For analysts assessing military power, this institutional integration means that NATO members cannot be evaluated solely as individual national armed forces; their combined capabilities constitute a collective force structure.

Burden Sharing and Capability Distribution

Alliance effectiveness also depends on how members distribute military resources. Differences in defence spending, force readiness, and technological capability influence the overall strength of collective defence arrangements.

Debates within NATO over defence spending illustrate how burden sharing affects alliance capability. The alliance's guideline that members allocate approximately two per cent of GDP to defence reflects an effort to maintain sufficient collective resources for deterrence and defence. From a measurement perspective, analysts must therefore consider both national military spending and the aggregated capabilities of alliance partners.

Extended Deterrence and Strategic Reach

Alliances also influence the credibility and geographic reach of military power through extended deterrence commitments. Security guarantees, often supported by forward deployments, integrated missile defences, and joint exercises, extend the protective umbrella of major military powers to allied states.

Such arrangements significantly expand the strategic influence of military capability. For example, U.S. extended deterrence commitments in Europe and the Indo-Pacific strengthen allied states' deterrent posture even when their own national forces are limited.

Implications for Measuring Military Power

Alliance structures hence complicate simple comparisons of national military capability. A state embedded within a strong alliance network may possess substantially greater effective military power than its domestic forces alone would suggest. Conversely, states operating outside alliance structures may face strategic constraints despite large national armed forces.

For this reason, analysts assessing military power must incorporate alliance factors such as collective force size, interoperability, basing access, and shared intelligence into their evaluations of strategic capability.

The analysis presented in this section demonstrates that military power cannot be evaluated solely at the national level. Alliance structures significantly influence the assessment of military capability by integrating the resources of multiple states into collective defence systems. Through mechanisms such as interoperability, intelligence sharing, shared planning, and coordinated logistics, alliances can substantially amplify the operational effectiveness of national military forces.

At the same time, alliances introduce political and institutional dynamics that shape how collective military power is generated and employed. Burden-sharing arrangements, political cohesion among member states, and the credibility of extended deterrence commitments all affect the overall effectiveness of alliance networks.

For analysts assessing military capability, alliances are a critical variable. States embedded in strong, cohesive alliance systems may possess far greater effective military power than their national resources alone would suggest. Conversely, states operating outside major alliance networks may face significant strategic constraints despite possessing substantial domestic military capacity.

However, even powerful alliances do not eliminate the uncertainties inherent in strategic assessment. Perceptions, intelligence limitations, and cognitive biases frequently influence how states interpret the capabilities and intentions of potential adversaries. The next section then examines how perception, intelligence assessment, and strategic miscalculation shape the evaluation of military power in international politics.

9.6. Perception, Intelligence, and Miscalculation

Assessments of military power are rarely based solely on objective indicators such as defence spending, force structure, or industrial capacity. Strategic evaluations are also shaped by perception, intelligence interpretation, and the cognitive frameworks decision-makers use to interpret available information. Because analysts must evaluate adversary capabilities and intentions under conditions of uncertainty, assessments of military power are inherently vulnerable to misperception and analytical bias.

The strategic studies literature has extensively analysed perception's role in international politics. Robert Jervis (1976) demonstrated that decision-makers frequently interpret information through preexisting beliefs and expectations about adversaries, which can lead to systematic misinterpretation of signals and intelligence data. Rather than evaluating information neutrally, analysts often filter evidence through cognitive frameworks shaped by historical experience, organisational culture, and strategic assumptions.

Intelligence institutions attempt to mitigate these problems through structured analytical processes and the systematic collection of information about adversary capabilities. However, intelligence analysis faces inherent limitations. Military modernisation programs often occur under secrecy, and the operational effectiveness of armed forces can be difficult to evaluate without direct observation. As a result, analysts frequently rely on indirect indicators, such as training exercises, procurement patterns, or doctrinal publications, to estimate adversary capabilities.

Richard Betts (1982) has argued that many intelligence failures occur not because information is unavailable, but because analysts misinterpret or discount information that contradicts prevailing assumptions. Organisational routines, institutional biases, and political pressures may reinforce analytical consensus even when alternative interpretations are plausible. In such cases, misperception becomes embedded within strategic assessments of military power.

Historical experience offers numerous examples of how misperception and intelligence failures have shaped evaluations of military capability and contributed to strategic surprise.

Intelligence Failure and Strategic Surprise: Historical Cases

One of the most widely studied cases of intelligence failure occurred during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Israel was surprised by coordinated Egyptian and Syrian attacks despite possessing extensive intelligence warning indicators. Israeli intelligence had received information suggesting that military preparations were underway, yet prevailing analytical assumptions, often referred to as the “conceptzia”, held that Egypt would not initiate war without achieving decisive military superiority in airpower. Because this assumption dominated intelligence analysis, analysts interpreted warning signals as defensive manoeuvres rather than preparations for an offensive operation.

When Egyptian and Syrian forces launched their attacks in October 1973, Israeli forces were initially caught unprepared despite Israel’s significant qualitative military advantages. Subsequent investigations concluded that the failure was less a result of insufficient intelligence collection than of analytical rigidity and institutional assumptions within the intelligence community (Betts 1982; Jervis 1976).

More recent developments demonstrate that even technologically advanced intelligence systems remain vulnerable to similar analytical challenges. The Hamas attack against Israel on 7 October 2023 revealed significant failures in Israeli threat assessment despite the country’s highly sophisticated intelligence infrastructure. Israel possesses extensive surveillance capabilities, including advanced signals intelligence, human intelligence networks, and technologically sophisticated border monitoring systems. Nevertheless, Hamas succeeded in coordinating a complex cross-border assault that initially overwhelmed Israeli defences.

Early analyses suggest that Israeli intelligence assessments had interpreted Hamas primarily as a deterrable actor focused on governance in Gaza rather than preparing for large-scale offensive operations. As a result, warning indicators were either discounted or interpreted within existing assumptions about Hamas’s strategic intentions. The attack consequently illustrates how even

technologically advanced intelligence systems remain vulnerable to cognitive bias and institutional expectations when evaluating adversary behaviour.

Another example of misperception influencing strategic assessment occurred during the 1991 Gulf War. Iraqi leadership significantly underestimated the capabilities and cohesion of the U.S.-led coalition assembled to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Iraqi planners assumed that coalition forces would struggle to sustain large-scale operations in the region and that political divisions among coalition members would weaken military resolve. In reality, coalition forces demonstrated overwhelming technological superiority, integrated command structures, and advanced precision-strike capabilities that rapidly degraded Iraqi military forces.

More recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 illustrates how misperception can shape strategic decision-making even among major military powers. Russian planners appear to have underestimated Ukrainian political cohesion, military readiness, and societal willingness to resist invasion. Prewar assumptions suggested that Ukrainian state institutions would collapse rapidly under military pressure. Instead, Ukrainian forces demonstrated considerable resilience, supported by effective leadership, societal mobilisation, and international assistance. These factors significantly altered the operational balance during the conflict (Watling and Reynolds 2023b; Freedman 2022).

Structural Limits of Intelligence in Measuring Military Capability

These cases illustrate a broader methodological challenge in measuring military power: the difficulty of evaluating qualitative factors such as morale, leadership competence, organisational cohesion, and political will. While analysts can estimate equipment inventories and defence spending with reasonable accuracy, assessing how military forces will perform under combat conditions is far more difficult.

Military effectiveness often depends on institutional characteristics that are difficult to observe externally. Leadership quality, training systems, command culture, and the ability of military organisations to adapt under pressure may only become fully visible during actual combat operations. Exercises and training activities may provide partial indicators, but they cannot replicate the psychological and operational stresses of wartime environments.

Furthermore, modern military capabilities increasingly involve technological systems that are difficult to evaluate from outside national defence establishments. Capabilities related to cyber warfare, AI, electronic warfare, and space systems often operate within highly classified environments. States may deliberately conceal the true capabilities of these systems or exaggerate them for deterrence purposes. This opacity complicates analysts' efforts to evaluate military capability accurately.

Consequently, assessments of military power should be understood as probabilistic estimates rather than precise measurements. Analysts integrate available intelligence, statistical indicators, and historical experience to generate informed judgments about the likely performance of military forces, but uncertainty always remains.

The cases discussed in this section illustrate the central role of perception and intelligence interpretation in assessing military capability. Even when analysts have substantial information about an adversary's defence spending, force structure, or technological development, cognitive frameworks, institutional assumptions, and political expectations shape how they interpret it.

Historical and contemporary cases show that intelligence assessments may misjudge both adversaries' capabilities and intentions. These failures often occur not because information is absent, but because analysts interpret warning indicators through prevailing assumptions.

For this reason, measuring military power cannot rely solely on quantitative indicators. Assessments must also account for uncertainty, potential intelligence gaps, and possible analytical bias. Strategic evaluations of military capability should therefore be treated as probabilistic judgments rather than precise measurements.

These challenges become even more pronounced as emerging technologies transform the character of military capability. Advances in cyber warfare, AI, autonomous systems, and space infrastructure add uncertainty to military power assessments. The following section examines how technological innovation further complicates measuring military capability in contemporary strategic competition.

9.7. Emerging Technologies and Measurement Challenges

Technological innovation has long shaped the evolution of military power, but recent advances in digital technologies are introducing new complexities into assessing military capability. Emerging systems such as AI, cyber operations, autonomous platforms, hypersonic weapons, and space-based infrastructure are reshaping the operating environment in which armed forces operate. At the same time, these technologies complicate traditional methods for measuring military power.

Historically, analysts could evaluate military capability using relatively straightforward indicators such as the number of tanks, aircraft, naval vessels, or artillery systems available to a state. These metrics provided approximate insights into the scale of military resources and allowed comparisons across national force structures. While such indicators remain relevant for certain aspects of military capability, they are increasingly insufficient for evaluating emerging technological systems whose effectiveness depends on complex networks, software architectures, and data integration rather than purely physical platforms.

Several characteristics of emerging technologies contribute to this measurement challenge. First, many advanced capabilities operate within highly classified environments. States often restrict information about cyber capabilities, AI applications, electronic warfare systems, and space-based assets because these technologies depend heavily on secrecy to be effective. Consequently, external observers frequently lack reliable information about the true capabilities of these systems.

Second, the operational impact of emerging technologies is difficult to evaluate because many have not yet been tested extensively in large-scale military conflict. AI systems designed for decision support, autonomous platforms capable of coordinated operations, and hypersonic weapons designed to evade missile defences remain in various stages of development and deployment. Without extensive operational experience, analysts must rely on simulations, limited demonstrations, and theoretical assessments when estimating their potential military impact.

Third, emerging technologies often operate as components of integrated technological ecosystems rather than as independent weapons platforms. AI may enhance intelligence analysis and targeting processes, cyber capabilities may disrupt adversary communication networks, and space-based infrastructure may support navigation, surveillance, and command systems. Because these technologies operate within interconnected systems, their strategic value depends not only on individual performance but also on how effectively they integrate into broader military architectures.

AI illustrates these challenges particularly clearly. AI-enabled systems increasingly process large volumes of intelligence data, support decision-making, and coordinate complex

operational networks. However, measuring the effectiveness of AI capabilities is difficult because performance depends on factors such as data quality, algorithmic design, computational infrastructure, and human-machine interaction. These elements are rarely observable through traditional indicators of military capability (Horowitz 2018; Allen and Chan 2017).

Cyber capabilities present an even greater challenge for analysts. Unlike conventional military assets, cyber weapons do not exist as easily observable physical systems. Their effectiveness often depends on vulnerabilities within adversary networks that may be unknown until exploited during an actual operation. States therefore possess cyber capabilities that remain largely invisible to external observers, making comparative assessments of cyber power highly uncertain.

Autonomous systems and unmanned platforms represent another area in which measurement becomes complex. While analysts can count drones or robotic systems in military inventories, their operational effectiveness depends heavily on software, communications networks, and integration with command structures. Coordinated autonomous swarms, for example, may generate military effects that simple numerical comparisons of platforms cannot easily predict.

Similarly, advances in hypersonic missile technology have attracted significant attention because they could alter strategic warning and interception timelines. Hypersonic glide vehicles and manoeuvrable missiles travelling at speeds exceeding Mach 5 could challenge existing missile defence architectures by reducing the time available for detection and interception. Yet the operational significance of these systems remains debated among analysts, reflecting uncertainty about their reliability, integration with targeting systems, and impact on broader strategic stability (Wilkening 2019).

Space-based infrastructure represents another critical but difficult-to-measure dimension of modern military capability. Satellites support navigation, communication, intelligence gathering, and missile warning systems that underpin both civilian and military activities. However, assessing the resilience and redundancy of space architecture, including anti-satellite capabilities and orbital surveillance systems, requires specialised technical analysis and often relies on incomplete information.

These technological developments illustrate a broader transformation in military capability. Whereas traditional military power was often measured through visible platforms and force structures, contemporary military effectiveness increasingly depends on information systems, digital networks, and technological integration. As a result, analysts must evaluate capabilities that are partly intangible, highly dynamic, and frequently concealed within classified technological programs.

Emerging technologies are fundamentally reshaping both the character of military power and the methods used to evaluate it. Capabilities related to AI, cyber operations, autonomous systems, hypersonic weapons, and space infrastructure operate within complex technological ecosystems that traditional quantitative indicators cannot easily measure.

For analysts assessing military capability, these developments introduce significant uncertainty. The effectiveness of emerging technologies often depends on factors that are difficult to observe externally, including software design, data integration, network resilience, and organisational adaptation. Consequently, traditional metrics such as platform counts or defence expenditure provide only partial insight into the true balance of technological capability.

These challenges reinforce the chapter's central argument: measuring military power requires a multidimensional analysis that integrates quantitative indicators with qualitative assessment

and contextual understanding. As technological innovation accelerates, strategic analysts must adapt their methods to evaluate capabilities that are increasingly complex, interconnected, and opaque.

The following section accordingly brings together the insights developed throughout this chapter and proposes a comprehensive framework for assessing military power that integrates material resources, institutional effectiveness, strategic context, and political factors.

9.8. A Framework for Assessing Military Power

The preceding sections of this chapter have demonstrated that measuring military power requires a multidimensional analytical approach. Quantitative indicators such as defence spending, personnel strength, and equipment inventories provide important baseline information about the scale of national military resources. Yet these indicators capture only part of a state's effective military capability. Institutional quality, technological integration, geographic conditions, alliance structures, and political decision-making also play decisive roles in determining how military power is generated and employed.

As warfare becomes increasingly complex and technologically interconnected, analysts must consequently move beyond simplified quantitative comparisons. Military capability should instead be understood as the product of interacting material, institutional, and strategic factors that together shape a state's capacity to employ force effectively. Assessing military power thus requires a comprehensive framework that integrates both measurable resources and qualitative dimensions of military effectiveness.

The following analytical framework synthesises the main dimensions discussed throughout this chapter and provides a structured approach for evaluating military capability.

Material resources

Material resources remain the most visible and measurable component of military capability. These include the size and composition of armed forces, weapons systems, defence expenditure, technological assets, and defence industrial resources. Quantitative indicators such as military spending, personnel levels, and equipment inventories provide essential baseline data for comparing the scale of national military capabilities.

Institutions such as IISS and SIPRI regularly compile comparative data on global military expenditures, procurement trends, and force structures. These datasets enable analysts to track long-term patterns of military modernisation and shifts in the global balance of power.

However, material resources alone rarely determine military effectiveness. Historical experience repeatedly demonstrates that forces possessing numerical or technological advantages may still perform poorly if they lack effective doctrine, training, or leadership. Material power thus represents only one dimension of military capability and must be interpreted alongside institutional and strategic factors (Biddle 2004).

Military institutions

Military effectiveness depends heavily on the institutional characteristics of armed forces. Doctrine, organisational structure, leadership development, PME, and civil–military relations all shape how military resources are organised and employed.

Barry Posen's (1984) analysis of military doctrine highlights how strategic and operational concepts influence the ability of states to translate resources into effective military action. Similarly, research on military effectiveness emphasises the importance of professional officer corps, meritocratic promotion systems, and adaptive organisational cultures in shaping combat performance (Millett, Murray, and Watman 1986; Brooks 2019).

Institutional quality also affects military organisations' ability to adapt to new technologies and changing operating environments. Armed forces capable of learning, experimentation, and doctrinal innovation are generally better positioned to integrate emerging technologies into coherent operational systems.

Operational Effectiveness

Another important dimension of military power concerns demonstrated operational competence. Military exercises, coalition operations, and real-world combat experience provide valuable insights into how effectively armed forces perform under operational conditions.

Operational performance reveals factors that quantitative indicators alone cannot capture. Command effectiveness, logistical coordination, training standards, and battlefield adaptability become visible during actual operations. Historical campaigns therefore offer important evidence about the practical capabilities of military organisations.

At the same time, operational effectiveness is often context-dependent. Forces optimised for counterinsurgency operations may face significant challenges in high-intensity conventional warfare, while armed forces designed primarily for territorial defence may lack expeditionary capabilities. Consequently, operational performance must always be evaluated within the strategic context in which military forces are employed.

Industrial and Technological Base

Modern military power depends heavily on the broader technological and industrial systems that sustain armed forces. Defence industrial capacity determines whether states can produce advanced weapons systems, maintain military equipment, and sustain prolonged military operations.

Recent conflicts have highlighted the strategic importance of industrial capacity and supply chain resilience. The war in Ukraine, for example, has revealed the enormous demand for artillery ammunition, missile systems, and armoured equipment generated by high-intensity warfare. This demand has exposed limitations in existing production capacity within many advanced economies and renewed attention to defence industrial mobilisation (Watling and Reynolds 2023b).

Technological innovation also plays an increasingly important role in shaping military capability. AI, cyber capabilities, autonomous systems, and space infrastructure are transforming operating environments and introducing new dimensions of strategic competition. States' ability to integrate these technologies into military organisations will significantly influence future balances of power.

Geographic Context

Geography remains a fundamental factor shaping military capability. Distance, terrain, access to maritime routes, and proximity to potential adversaries all influence how military forces can be deployed and sustained.

Strategic geography shapes logistics, operations planning, and force-structure decisions. Maritime powers tend to emphasise naval mobility and control of sea lines of communication, while continental powers often prioritise land forces and strategic depth. Classical geopolitical analyses by Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder continue to highlight geography's enduring influence on long-term strategic competition.

Geography also shapes the practical utility of military power. A state may possess substantial armed forces but still face constraints if it lacks the logistical infrastructure or basing access required for effective power projection. Conversely, favourable geographic positioning can significantly enhance defensive resilience and strategic depth.

Alliances and Partnerships

States rarely exercise military power in complete isolation. Alliances and security partnerships significantly influence the distribution and effectiveness of military capabilities by integrating the resources of multiple states.

Alliance structures enable collective defence, intelligence sharing, joint training, and coordinated procurement programs. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization represents one of the most sophisticated examples of alliance integration, combining national military capabilities within a shared strategic framework.

From an analytical perspective, alliances multiply national military power. A state embedded in a cohesive alliance system may have a far greater effective military capability than its national resources alone would suggest. At the same time, alliance systems introduce political dynamics that shape strategic decision-making, burden sharing, and member states' willingness to use force.

Political Will and Strategic Leadership

Finally, military capability ultimately depends on political leadership and societal willingness to employ military force. Strategic decision-making, public support, and national cohesion all influence whether military resources can be mobilised effectively during crises or conflicts. Political will determines the objectives for which military power is used and the resources devoted to national defence. Strategic leadership also shapes the coherence of national strategy, the integration of military and non-military instruments of power, and states' ability to sustain prolonged military efforts.

Ukraine's experience since 2022 illustrates the importance of political leadership and societal mobilisation in sustaining military resistance against a materially stronger adversary. Political legitimacy, national unity, and international support have significantly amplified Ukraine's effective military power despite material asymmetries.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that military power cannot be reduced to a single measurable variable. Effective military capability emerges from the interaction of multiple dimensions, including material resources, institutional quality, operational competence, technological and industrial capacity, geographic context, alliance structures, and political leadership.

Quantitative indicators such as defence expenditure, personnel strength, and equipment inventories remain important tools for comparing national military resources. However, these metrics provide only partial insight into the real balance of military capability. Institutional

effectiveness, operational performance, and strategic context often determine whether material resources translate into battlefield success. Moreover, the growing importance of emerging technologies, cyber capabilities, space infrastructure, and autonomous systems further complicates traditional military assessment methods. Many of these capabilities operate within highly classified technological ecosystems whose effectiveness cannot easily be captured through conventional metrics.

Strategic assessments of military power must consequently remain inherently probabilistic. Intelligence limitations, technological secrecy, and the unpredictability of warfare ensure that evaluations of military capability will always involve some uncertainty. Analysts must accordingly combine quantitative indicators with qualitative judgment, historical experience, and contextual understanding to develop balanced assessments of the strategic environment.

Ultimately, military power should be understood as a systemic phenomenon rather than a simple aggregation of weapons and personnel. The effectiveness of armed forces depends on interactions among resources, institutions, technological systems, and political leadership within the broader framework of national power. Understanding how military power is measured provides an essential foundation for examining how warfare itself may evolve in the coming decades. As technological innovation accelerates and geopolitical competition intensifies, the strategic environment is likely to undergo significant transformation. The following chapter then explores the future of warfare and the emerging dynamics that may shape military power in the twenty-first century.

10. THE TRANSFORMATION OF WARFARE AND THE FUTURE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The character of warfare is undergoing profound transformation in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Advances in technology, intensifying geopolitical competition, and growing interdependence among military, economic, and informational systems are reshaping how states prepare for and conduct conflict. Contemporary security environments are therefore characterised by a widening spectrum of strategic competition that extends beyond traditional battlefields and involves multiple domains of interaction, including cyberspace, outer space, economic systems, and the global information environment.

The preceding chapter showed that effective military power increasingly depends on integrating political leadership, military institutions, and societal resilience. Civil–military governance provides the institutional foundation through which states mobilise resources, maintain legitimacy, and coordinate strategic action across multiple instruments of power. However, the transformation of warfare now places new demands on these governance structures. As military operations become more technologically complex and strategically interconnected, states must adapt their institutions, doctrines, and strategic planning processes accordingly.

At the same time, the boundaries between war and peace are becoming increasingly blurred. Contemporary strategic competition often unfolds through hybrid methods, including cyber operations, economic coercion, disinformation campaigns, and technological rivalry. These forms of competition may occur below the threshold of conventional war but can nonetheless generate significant strategic effects. As a result, the future strategic environment is likely to involve prolonged periods of multidimensional competition punctuated by episodic military confrontation.

The ongoing war in Ukraine provides an important contemporary illustration of these dynamics. The conflict demonstrates how modern warfare combines conventional military operations with information warfare, economic sanctions, technological innovation, and societal mobilisation. It also highlights the growing importance of networked systems, autonomous technologies, and real-time intelligence in shaping battlefield outcomes. In this sense, Ukraine represents not only a major geopolitical conflict but also a preview of broader transformations occurring in the conduct of warfare.

Understanding these transformations requires moving beyond narrow technological determinism. Emerging technologies, such as AI, autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, and space-based infrastructure, will undoubtedly influence future conflict. Yet technological change interacts with political institutions, military doctrine, economic capacity, and societal resilience. The future of warfare will thus be determined by the interaction between technological innovation and the broader strategic systems within which these technologies operate.

This chapter examines the transformation of warfare through several interconnected dimensions. It begins by exploring how the character of war is evolving in response to technological and geopolitical change. It then analyses the growing importance of MDOs, AI, and technological convergence in shaping future military capabilities. Finally, the chapter considers how these developments may reshape the relationship between military power, society, and strategic governance in the decades ahead.

10.1. The Changing Character of Warfare in the 21st Century

One central insight of classical strategic theory is that the nature of war remains constant while its character evolves over time. Carl von Clausewitz famously argued that war is fundamentally a political act, a continuation of politics by other means, shaped by enduring elements of violence, uncertainty, and political purpose. While the essential nature of war may remain stable, how wars are fought changes continuously as societies, technologies, and political systems evolve (Clausewitz 1976).

Modern strategic analysis therefore distinguishes between the enduring nature of war and the evolving character of warfare. The nature of war reflects enduring human and political dynamics, including violence, friction, and the pursuit of political objectives. By contrast, the character of warfare is shaped by historical context. Changes in technology, economic organisation, political structures, and social mobilisation continually alter how wars are conducted and experienced (Gray 2010).

The early twenty-first century is witnessing a particularly significant transformation in the character of warfare. Several structural forces are driving this change. The first is the accelerating pace of technological innovation. Advances in digital technologies, AI, robotics, cyber capabilities, and space systems are reshaping the operating environment in which military forces operate. These technologies enable new forms of surveillance, precision targeting, autonomous operations, and networked command structures that significantly expand military possibilities.

A second driver of transformation is the re-emergence of great-power competition. Following the relative geopolitical stability that characterised the early post-Cold War period, international politics has entered a new phase of strategic rivalry among major powers. Competition between the United States, China, and Russia increasingly spans multiple domains, including military modernisation, technological development, economic influence, and information operations. This environment encourages states to develop new military capabilities and strategic concepts designed to operate across interconnected domains of conflict.

A third factor shaping the evolving character of warfare is the increasing integration of military and non-military instruments of power. Contemporary conflicts frequently involve economic sanctions, cyber operations, political influence campaigns, and technological competition alongside traditional military operations. States often use these instruments simultaneously to weaken adversaries while avoiding direct escalation to large-scale conventional war.

This evolving environment has led many analysts to describe modern conflict as multidomain competition, in which states seek strategic advantage across multiple operational domains simultaneously. Military forces must accordingly be capable of operating simultaneously in land, maritime, air, cyber, and space domains while coordinating with diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments of national power.

Recent conflicts illustrate these dynamics. The war in Ukraine demonstrates how conventional military operations can coexist with cyber warfare, economic sanctions, strategic communication campaigns, and technological innovation. Ukrainian forces have combined traditional military defence with extensive use of drones, digital communication systems, and open-source intelligence networks. Meanwhile, international partners have employed economic sanctions, military assistance, and diplomatic pressure to influence the broader strategic environment.

Such developments suggest that future wars will increasingly be shaped by systemic interactions between military operations, technological systems, and societal resilience. Military victory may depend not only on battlefield performance but also on states' ability to sustain economic production, maintain political legitimacy, protect critical infrastructure, and mobilise technological innovation during prolonged conflict.

At the same time, the diffusion of advanced technologies may reduce the barriers to entry for certain forms of military capability. Smaller actors can sometimes develop and deploy unmanned systems, cyber tools, and information operations at relatively low cost compared with traditional military platforms. This dynamic may increase the strategic relevance of non-state actors and smaller states within the broader international security environment.

Nevertheless, technological change does not eliminate the fundamental uncertainties of warfare. Friction, miscalculation, and human decision-making remain central features of conflict. Technology alters the context of war but does not remove the political and strategic complexities that define it.

The transformation of warfare in the twenty-first century should therefore be understood as a process of systemic evolution rather than technological revolution alone. New technologies, geopolitical competition, and societal change interact to produce a strategic environment characterised by MDOs, continuous competition, and increasing integration between military and civilian systems.

Understanding this evolving character of warfare provides the analytical foundation for examining the more specific developments explored in the following sections of this chapter, including MDOs, AI, technological convergence, and the broader transformation of strategic competition.

10.2. Multidomain Warfare and the Integration of Strategic Domains: Strategic Implications

The previous chapters examined how contemporary military power operates within an increasingly interconnected strategic environment shaped by interactions across multiple operational domains. Rather than reiterating the doctrinal foundations of MDOs, this section considers the broader implications of this multidomain environment for the future conduct of warfare. As technological systems increasingly connect land, maritime, air, cyber, space, and informational environments into an integrated strategic architecture, warfare is evolving from a contest between individual military formations into a competition between interconnected operational systems.

Modern armed forces increasingly operate through networks that link sensors, communication infrastructures, command systems, precision weapons, and logistical support. These interconnected architectures enable unprecedented levels of coordination and situational awareness. At the same time, they also create new vulnerabilities. Disruptions in communication networks, satellite infrastructure, cyber systems, or the EMS can degrade the effectiveness of entire military formations. Consequently, contemporary military competition increasingly involves attempts to disrupt, degrade, or manipulate adversary systems rather than simply destroying battlefield forces (Freedman 2017; Gray 2010).

This systemic dimension of warfare alters the strategic logic of conflict. In multidomain environments, adversaries may seek to degrade decision-making processes, disrupt logistics, manipulate information flows, or undermine situational awareness. Cyber operations, electronic warfare, and space interference thus become integral elements of military strategy. The

objective is not solely territorial control or battlefield attrition but the erosion of the adversary's capacity to perceive, decide, and coordinate action effectively.

Domain integration also transforms the tempo of military operations. Advances in sensing technologies, digital communications, and precision-strike systems accelerate the flow of information between observation and action. Decision cycles become compressed as commanders receive near-real-time data from multiple sources and must respond to rapidly evolving operational conditions. Strategic advantage may consequently depend increasingly on the ability to process information rapidly and act faster than adversaries.

However, pursuing operational speed introduces new risks. Highly networked military systems generate enormous volumes of data, creating challenges of information overload and decision latency. Commanders must distinguish between relevant intelligence and background noise while operating under significant time pressure. Moreover, the growing reliance on automated data processing and algorithmic decision-support tools raises questions about transparency, reliability, and human oversight in high-stakes strategic environments.

Another consequence of multidomain integration is the growing emphasis on distributed and resilient force structures. Traditional military organisations often relied on centralised command systems and concentrated force deployments. In contrast, precision-strike environments and contested information networks increase the vulnerability of centralised nodes and large formations. Contemporary military thinking, therefore, emphasises dispersion, redundancy, and decentralised decision-making. Distributed forces can continue operating even when elements of communication networks or command structures are degraded.

Recent conflicts illustrate these dynamics. The war in Ukraine has shown both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of networked warfare. Ukrainian forces have integrated drone surveillance, satellite intelligence, digital communications, and precision artillery in ways that enable rapid targeting cycles and adaptive battlefield responses. At the same time, electronic warfare and cyber operations have repeatedly disrupted communication networks and unmanned systems, highlighting the contested nature of the information environment (Watling and Reynolds 2023a).

Domain integration also expands the relationship between military operations and civilian technological infrastructures. Many contemporary military capabilities rely heavily on commercial technologies such as satellite communications, cloud computing, AI, and advanced data analytics. Private technology companies and research institutions accordingly play an increasingly important role in shaping military capability and operational effectiveness.

This convergence between civilian and military technological ecosystems introduces both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Civilian innovation can significantly enhance military capabilities, but dependence on commercial infrastructures and global supply chains may also expose critical vulnerabilities during crises or conflicts. In future wars, adversaries may seek to exploit these dependencies through cyber operations, economic pressure, or disruption of key technological sectors.

Finally, the multidomain environment amplifies the strategic significance of information and perception. Because military operations unfold within globally connected communication networks, the informational dimension of conflict becomes inseparable from physical combat operations. Strategic narratives, digital media, and information campaigns influence public opinion, alliance cohesion, and international legitimacy. In this sense, multidomain warfare extends beyond the battlefield into the broader political and cognitive environment.

Taken together, these developments indicate a transition from platform-centric warfare toward system-centric competition. Military effectiveness increasingly depends not only on individual weapons platforms but on the resilience and integration of entire operational architectures. The ability to maintain situational awareness, sustain communication networks, and coordinate actions across domains may prove decisive in future conflicts.

At the same time, the complexity and speed of multidomain systems place growing demands on military decision-making processes. Command structures must process vast amounts of data, coordinate dispersed forces, and respond rapidly to emerging threats. These challenges highlight the growing importance of advanced data analytics and AI in supporting military command systems.

As military organisations confront increasingly complex and accelerated operating environments, AI technologies are likely to play an expanding role in shaping military decision-making architectures. The next section then examines how advances in AI and machine learning may transform military command systems, operational tempo, and the broader dynamics of strategic competition.

10.3. Artificial Intelligence and the Transformation of Military Decision-Making

The increasing complexity and speed of multidomain warfare place growing demands on military decision-making processes. As described in the previous section, contemporary military operations depend on vast networks linking sensors, communication infrastructures, and precision-strike systems. These architectures generate enormous volumes of operational data that must be processed rapidly to maintain situational awareness and coordinate effective responses. AI technologies are therefore emerging as a critical component of future military command systems.

AI broadly refers to computational systems that can perform tasks that normally require human cognition, including pattern recognition, prediction, and adaptive decision-making. In military contexts, AI is increasingly used for intelligence analysis, surveillance processing, logistics optimisation, and decision support. Rather than replacing human command authority, most contemporary military applications aim to enhance decision superiority by enabling faster, more accurate interpretation of complex data environments (Allen and Chan 2017).

AI-Supported Command Systems

One of the most immediate applications of AI lies in the development of AI-supported command systems. Modern battlefields produce enormous streams of data derived from satellites, drones, sensors, communications intercepts, and open-source intelligence. Human analysts alone cannot process this information fast enough to support rapid operational decisions.

AI-based analytical tools can help commanders filter large volumes of data, identify patterns, and generate predictive assessments of adversary behaviour. These systems can highlight emerging threats, recommend operational responses, and prioritise targets for further investigation. In highly networked operating environments, AI consequently functions as a decision-support architecture, enabling commanders to maintain situational awareness despite the increasing complexity of the information environment.

The growing reliance on AI-enabled decision systems reflects a broader transformation in how military power is organised. As warfare becomes increasingly system-centric, the effectiveness of military forces depends not only on physical capabilities but also on the ability to process

information and coordinate actions across dispersed networks. AI-supported command architectures therefore extend the broader trend toward information-dominant warfare.

Algorithmic Warfare and the Acceleration of Decision Cycles

AI may also significantly accelerate the tempo of military operations. Automated data processing and predictive analytics can compress the time required to detect threats, analyse intelligence, and generate operational responses. In highly dynamic environments, such as missile defence, cyber operations, or electronic warfare, rapid decision cycles may prove essential for maintaining operational advantage.

The concept of algorithmic warfare captures this transformation. In such environments, algorithms help identify targets, coordinate autonomous systems, and recommend tactical responses. The ability to observe, orient, decide, and act more rapidly than an adversary may therefore become an increasingly important determinant of military success.

However, accelerated decision cycles also introduce new strategic risks. As operational tempo increases, political leaders and military commanders may have less time to assess the broader consequences of their actions. Automated systems may recommend responses based on incomplete data or algorithmic biases, potentially increasing the risk of miscalculation. These dynamics raise concerns that excessive reliance on automated decision systems could reduce opportunities for deliberation and strategic restraint (Johnson, Smith, and Taylor 2020).

Human–Machine Command Relationships

Despite rapid technological progress, human judgment remains central to military decision-making. Most military doctrines emphasise that AI should function as a supporting tool rather than a replacement for human authority. Human commanders remain responsible for interpreting strategic context, evaluating ethical considerations, and determining political objectives.

The relationship between human decision-makers and AI systems therefore represents a critical challenge for future military organisations. Command structures must decide how to distribute authority between human operators and automated systems. Excessive reliance on algorithmic recommendations may create “automation bias,” in which human operators defer to machine-generated conclusions even when those conclusions are uncertain or incomplete.

At the same time, overly restrictive human control may negate the advantages of automated systems in high-speed operating environments. Balancing human oversight with algorithmic efficiency accordingly becomes a central issue in governing AI-enabled warfare. Many defence organisations now emphasise human-in-the-loop or human-on-the-loop control, ensuring that human operators retain ultimate authority over the use of lethal force.

Ethical Constraints and the Principle of Meaningful Human Control

Beyond operational efficiency and strategic stability, integrating AI into military decision-making raises fundamental ethical questions about responsibility, accountability, and the lawful use of force. Military operations are governed by long-established legal and ethical frameworks, including international humanitarian law and the principles of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity. The increasing autonomy of algorithmic systems raises concerns about whether such systems can reliably interpret these principles in complex and ambiguous combat environments.

A central concept emerging in contemporary debates is the principle of meaningful human control. This principle emphasises that human decision-makers must retain ultimate authority

over the use of lethal force, ensuring that ethical judgment and legal responsibility remain grounded in human agency rather than delegated entirely to autonomous systems. Maintaining meaningful human control is widely regarded as essential for preserving both accountability and legitimacy in AI-enabled warfare.

Ethical considerations also intersect with broader issues of public trust and democratic governance. If military institutions were perceived as delegating life-and-death decisions to opaque algorithmic systems, public confidence in the legitimacy of military action could erode. Transparent governance frameworks, ethical guidelines, and robust oversight mechanisms thus play an important role in ensuring that AI integration remains consistent with societal values and international legal norms (Scharre 2018; Johnson 2021).

These concerns have prompted governments and international organisations to adopt ethical principles for military AI. NATO's 2021 Principles of Responsible Use of AI and similar national frameworks emphasise accountability, traceability, reliability, and human oversight as core requirements for AI-enabled military systems. Such initiatives reflect a growing recognition that ethical governance is not merely a normative concern but a strategic necessity for maintaining legitimacy, alliance cohesion, and long-term stability amid accelerating technological competition.

Autonomy and Escalation Risks

The development of autonomous weapons systems represents one of the most controversial aspects of AI-enabled warfare. Autonomous systems, including UAVs, maritime drones, and robotic ground platforms, can operate with varying degrees of independence from human operators. Some systems can already identify targets and execute attacks with minimal human intervention.

While such systems may enhance operational efficiency and reduce risks to human personnel, they also raise significant concerns regarding escalation and accountability. Autonomous systems operating in contested environments may misinterpret signals, malfunction, or interact unpredictably with adversary systems. In densely networked battlespaces, such interactions could produce unintended escalation dynamics.

These risks are particularly acute in operational domains characterised by compressed decision cycles, such as cyber warfare or missile defence. If automated systems respond to perceived threats faster than political authorities can intervene, escalation processes may unfold more rapidly than traditional crisis management mechanisms can accommodate. Scholars therefore warn that overreliance on autonomous systems could contribute to strategic instability, particularly if adversaries believe automated responses will be triggered under ambiguous conditions (Acton 2018).

Governance and Strategic Stability in AI-Enabled Warfare

The strategic implications of AI extend beyond operational effectiveness to the broader governance of military power. As AI systems become integrated into command architectures, states must develop frameworks for oversight, accountability, and ethical restraint. Civilian authorities, international institutions, and military organisations all play a role in shaping these governance structures.

Several international initiatives have already begun to address the challenges associated with AI-enabled warfare. Discussions within the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), for example, have focused on regulating lethal autonomous weapons systems. Meanwhile, NATO and several national governments have adopted

principles emphasising responsible AI use, transparency, and human control in military applications.

These governance efforts reflect a broader recognition that technological innovation must be balanced with strategic stability. If states pursue AI-enabled military capabilities without adequate oversight, the resulting arms competition could increase uncertainty and escalation risk. Conversely, effective governance frameworks may help ensure that AI enhances military effectiveness without undermining political control or international security.

The development of AI hence represents both an opportunity and a challenge for future military power. AI technologies can significantly enhance situational awareness, operational coordination, and decision speed. At the same time, they introduce new risks associated with automation, escalation dynamics, and the distribution of authority between human decision-makers and technological systems.

In this sense, AI reinforces the broader transformation of warfare discussed throughout this chapter. Future military effectiveness will depend not only on technological innovation but also on political and military institutions' ability to integrate emerging technologies within stable governance structures and coherent strategic frameworks.

10.4. Technological Convergence and the Transformation of the Battlespace

While AI represents an important driver of change in military decision-making, the transformation of warfare in the coming decades will not be shaped by a single technological innovation. Rather, it will emerge from the convergence of multiple technological systems operating simultaneously across domains. Advances in autonomous platforms, cyber capabilities, space infrastructure, precision strike systems, and electronic warfare increasingly interact to form complex operational ecosystems. In such environments, military effectiveness depends not only on individual technologies but on the capacity to integrate them into coherent operational architectures.

This convergence reflects a broader shift from platform-based military power toward networked technological ecosystems. Traditional military capabilities were often defined by individual platforms such as aircraft, tanks, or naval vessels. In contrast, modern warfare increasingly depends on interconnected systems combining sensors, communications networks, data processing, and precision strike capabilities. These integrated architectures enable rapid information exchange and coordinated action across geographically dispersed forces.

Autonomous Systems and Swarm Warfare

One of the most visible manifestations of technological convergence is the growing role of unmanned and autonomous systems. Advances in robotics, AI, and sensor technology have enabled the rapid proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles, maritime drones, and ground-based robotic systems. These platforms provide surveillance, targeting, and strike capabilities while reducing risks to human personnel.

Recent conflicts demonstrate the operational significance of such systems. The war in Ukraine has shown how relatively inexpensive unmanned aerial systems can significantly influence battlefield dynamics by providing real-time reconnaissance and enabling precision targeting. Similarly, maritime drone operations in the Black Sea have demonstrated the potential of autonomous systems to challenge traditional naval power.

Beyond individual platforms, the next stage of technological development may involve coordinated autonomous swarms. Swarm systems consist of multiple autonomous platforms

that operate collaboratively through distributed algorithms. Such systems could overwhelm traditional defences through numbers and adaptability, potentially transforming air defence, maritime warfare, and battlefield reconnaissance (Scharre 2018).

Cyber-Electronic Warfare Integration

Another critical dimension of technological convergence involves the integration of cyber capabilities and electronic warfare. Modern military systems rely heavily on digital networks, satellite communications, and EMS management. As a result, cyber operations and electronic warfare increasingly function as central components of military strategy rather than as supporting activities.

Cyber capabilities enable states to disrupt adversary command networks, manipulate data systems, and target critical infrastructure. Electronic warfare, meanwhile, can degrade radar systems, communication networks, and navigation signals. When combined with precision-strike capabilities and unmanned systems, these tools enable adversaries to target the informational foundations of military power.

The growing integration of cyber and electronic warfare therefore reinforces the systemic nature of contemporary conflict. Rather than seeking solely to destroy physical forces, adversaries increasingly attempt to blind, disrupt, and disorient opposing military systems. In such environments, resilience, redundancy, and secure communications become essential components of military effectiveness.

Space Infrastructure and Orbital Competition

Space has also emerged as a critical component of modern military capability. Satellite systems provide navigation, communication, intelligence, missile warning, and environmental monitoring. These services underpin both civilian infrastructure and military operations, making space-based systems essential for contemporary multidomain warfare.

At the same time, space is becoming increasingly contested. Several major powers are developing anti-satellite capabilities, electronic interference technologies, and space-based surveillance systems designed to disrupt or degrade adversary orbital infrastructure. Satellites' vulnerability introduces new strategic risks, as disruptions to space systems could significantly affect military operations and civilian economic systems alike.

The growing importance of space infrastructure also reinforces the convergence between military and civilian technologies. Commercial satellite constellations, private launch capabilities, and rapidly expanding space industries now play an important role in national security. The integration of commercial space services into military operations illustrates how technological innovation outside traditional defence sectors increasingly shapes the future battlespace (Bowen 2020).

Hypersonic and Long-Range Precision Strike

Advances in missile technology represent another important dimension of technological convergence in contemporary warfare. Hypersonic weapons, capable of travelling at speeds exceeding Mach 5 while manoeuvring within the atmosphere, have attracted significant attention in recent years. These systems combine very high velocity with enhanced manoeuvrability, potentially enabling them to evade existing missile defence architectures and reach targets with significantly reduced warning time.

Although hypersonic technology remains in relatively early stages of deployment, its strategic significance lies primarily in its potential to compress decision timelines and complicate

existing warning and interception systems. By reducing the time available for detection, tracking, and response, hypersonic weapons may challenge traditional models of strategic stability and crisis management. When combined with advances in sensing technologies, data fusion, and AI-supported targeting systems, hypersonic platforms could enhance long-range precision strike capabilities across multiple domains (Wilkening 2019).

At the same time, the strategic impact of hypersonic weapons remains debated. Some analysts argue that their primary effect may be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, reinforcing existing trends toward precision strike and long-range engagement rather than fundamentally transforming deterrence relationships. Nevertheless, major powers' growing interest in hypersonic systems reflects broader concerns about technological competition and the future balance between offensive strike capabilities and defensive interception systems.

Directed-Energy Systems

Another emerging component of the evolving technological landscape is the development of directed-energy weapons, particularly high-energy laser systems. Unlike traditional kinetic weapons, directed-energy systems deliver energy to a target at the speed of light, enabling extremely rapid engagement of aerial threats such as drones, missiles, or artillery projectiles.

Several states are currently developing laser-based air defence systems designed to counter the growing proliferation of UAVs and low-cost precision weapons. Because laser systems rely on electrical power rather than physical ammunition, they offer the potential for significantly lower per-engagement costs compared with conventional interceptor missiles. In environments where adversaries employ large numbers of inexpensive drones or loitering munitions, directed-energy systems may consequently provide an economically sustainable defensive capability.

Directed-energy technologies also illustrate the broader logic of technological convergence discussed in this chapter. Laser systems depend heavily on advanced sensors, tracking algorithms, and integrated command networks to identify and engage targets effectively. AI may assist in target recognition and engagement prioritisation, while resilient power systems and cooling technologies determine the practical effectiveness of such systems.

At the same time, directed-energy weapons face significant technical and operational challenges. Atmospheric interference, power-generation requirements, and platform-integration constraints limit their range and reliability under certain conditions. As a result, laser systems are unlikely to replace conventional air defence architectures soon. Instead, they will likely serve as complementary defensive layers within IAMD systems, particularly for counter-drone operations and short-range air defence.

Despite these limitations, directed-energy weapons illustrate how emerging technologies may reshape the economics and operational dynamics of future warfare. As unmanned systems proliferate and precision weapons become more widely available, armed forces will increasingly seek defensive technologies that can counter large numbers of relatively inexpensive threats. Directed-energy systems then represent an important component of the broader technological ecosystem shaping the future battlespace (Scharre 2018).

Systemic Integration and the Future Battlespace

Taken together, these technological developments illustrate the growing convergence of multiple innovation trajectories within contemporary military systems. Autonomous platforms, cyber capabilities, space infrastructure, and advanced strike systems increasingly operate within interconnected operational architectures supported by AI and digital communications networks.

The result is a battlespace characterised by distributed sensors, autonomous platforms, high-speed decision cycles, and persistent multidomain competition. Military forces must therefore operate within environments that are technologically dense, informationally complex, and strategically interconnected.

In such environments, technological superiority alone does not guarantee strategic success. The decisive factor increasingly lies in states' ability to integrate diverse technologies into coherent strategic systems while maintaining resilience against disruption. Effective governance, institutional adaptation, and alliance cooperation hence remain essential for translating technological innovation into sustainable military advantage.

The convergence of emerging technologies thus reinforces the broader transformation of warfare discussed throughout this chapter. Future conflicts will likely be shaped by the interaction of advanced technologies with political decision-making, societal resilience, and strategic governance. Understanding these interactions is essential for anticipating how military power may evolve in the coming decades.

10.5. Society, Economy, and the Return of Strategic Mobilisation

Technological transformation alone does not determine the future of warfare. Military power ultimately depends on the broader political, economic, and societal systems that sustain armed forces over time. As the strategic environment becomes increasingly characterised by prolonged competition and technological rivalry, states' ability to mobilise resources, maintain industrial capacity, and sustain societal resilience is re-emerging as a central element of strategic effectiveness.

During much of the post–Cold War period, many advanced economies assumed that large-scale industrial mobilisation for war had become largely obsolete. Military planning emphasised rapid expeditionary operations, technological superiority, and relatively small professional forces. However, recent conflicts and renewed great-power competition have challenged this assumption. Contemporary wars increasingly demonstrate that sustained military operations require substantial industrial capacity, resilient supply chains, and broad societal support.

The war in Ukraine provides a particularly instructive example of this dynamic. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, both Ukraine and its international partners have confronted the challenge of sustaining large-scale military operations over extended periods. The conflict has revealed the importance of ammunition production, logistics networks, and defence industrial capacity in maintaining battlefield effectiveness. High-intensity warfare has driven consumption rates of artillery ammunition, missiles, and armoured equipment far above prewar production levels in many Western countries (Watling and Reynolds 2023b).

These developments have renewed interest in strategic mobilisation, understood not only as the mobilisation of military personnel but also as the broader coordination of industrial production, technological innovation, and economic policy to support national defence. In this sense, strategic mobilisation represents the practical interaction between military capability, economic capacity, and political governance discussed in earlier chapters of this book.

Governments increasingly recognise that the defence industrial base is a critical component of national security. Investments in production capacity, supply chain resilience, and technological research consequently play an important role in shaping long-term strategic competition.

The growing importance of technological competition further reinforces this trend. Advanced military capabilities increasingly depend on complex supply chains involving semiconductors, advanced materials, satellite technologies, and specialised manufacturing processes. Control over such technological ecosystems may significantly influence future military balances. Consequently, economic policy, industrial policy, and technological innovation are becoming increasingly integrated into national security strategies.

This integration reflects the broader concept of economic statecraft, in which states deliberately use economic instruments to shape geopolitical outcomes (Blackwill and Harris 2016). In recent years, states have used economic measures extensively in response to geopolitical conflicts. Sanctions imposed on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine illustrate how economic instruments can function as a complement to military deterrence and diplomatic pressure.

At the same time, the increasing interdependence of global economic systems introduces new vulnerabilities. Geopolitical tensions, cyber operations, or targeted economic coercion can disrupt complex supply chains. Dependence on foreign technology suppliers or critical materials can accordingly create strategic risks. As a result, many governments are reassessing the resilience of key sectors such as energy, telecommunications, and semiconductor manufacturing.

Another dimension of strategic mobilisation concerns society's role in sustaining national defence. Modern conflicts increasingly involve military operations interacting with civilian infrastructure, digital networks, and public communication systems. Societal resilience, the capacity of populations to withstand disruption, maintain social cohesion, and support national objectives during crises, thus becomes an important component of strategic effectiveness.

In democratic societies, maintaining political legitimacy and public support is particularly important for sustaining long-term military commitments. Public trust in political institutions, transparency in decision-making, and effective strategic communication all contribute to societal resilience during periods of conflict. The Ukrainian experience again illustrates how political leadership, national identity, and societal solidarity can strengthen a nation's ability to resist external aggression.

These developments suggest that the future of warfare may increasingly resemble systemic competition between national technological and industrial ecosystems, rather than purely military confrontations between armed forces. Military capabilities remain essential, but their effectiveness depends heavily on the broader economic and societal systems that sustain them.

The renewed importance of strategic mobilisation therefore reinforces a central theme of this book: military power cannot be understood in isolation from the wider structures of national power. Armed forces operate within complex networks of political authority, technological innovation, industrial capacity, and societal resilience. As technological change accelerates and geopolitical rivalry intensifies, states' ability to integrate these elements into coherent strategic systems will likely become a decisive determinant of success in future conflicts.

10.6. The Cognitive Battlespace and the Future of Strategic Influence

While technological transformation and economic mobilisation shape the material foundations of future warfare, the cognitive and informational dimensions of conflict are becoming increasingly central to strategic competition. Military power in the twenty-first century is exercised not only by destroying physical targets but also by manipulating perception, belief, and decision-making. As communication networks, digital platforms, and AI reshape the

information environment, the struggle for influence over human cognition has emerged as a key arena of geopolitical rivalry.

Historically, information has always played an important role in warfare. Propaganda, psychological operations, and strategic communication have long shaped adversary morale and public opinion. However, contemporary technological developments have significantly expanded the scale, speed, and sophistication with which actors can generate, disseminate, and manipulate information. Social media platforms, algorithmic amplification, and AI-generated content enable state and non-state actors to influence audiences across national boundaries with unprecedented reach and immediacy (Singer and Brooking 2018).

The resulting environment is often described as the cognitive battlespace, a domain in which the primary objective is not physical destruction but the shaping of perceptions, beliefs, and decision processes within societies and institutions. In this environment, influence operations may seek to undermine public trust, weaken political cohesion, or distort strategic decision-making. Such activities frequently occur below the threshold of conventional armed conflict, making them particularly attractive tools in long-term strategic competition.

Several contemporary military doctrines have begun to recognise the importance of this dimension of conflict. NATO, for example, increasingly refers to the cognitive domain as a key arena of modern warfare, emphasising the protection of societal resilience and democratic institutions against disinformation and influence operations. Similarly, Chinese military thought highlights the integration of information, psychological, and legal warfare, often described as the “Three Warfares”, as instruments for shaping the strategic environment without direct military confrontation (Kania and Costello 2020).

Another influential intellectual tradition shaping contemporary cognitive competition originates in Russian military thought. Russian strategists have long emphasised reflexive control, a theory developed during the Soviet period that seeks to influence adversary decision-making by shaping the information and perceptions on which those decisions are based. Rather than coercing an opponent through direct force, reflexive control aims to induce the adversary to choose actions that align with the initiator’s strategic objectives (Thomas 2004).

In practical terms, reflexive control involves manipulating information, narratives, and signals to shape how adversaries interpret events and evaluate strategic choices. This approach may include disinformation campaigns, selective disclosure of information, diplomatic signalling, or demonstrations of military capability designed to influence an opponent’s perception of risks and opportunities. Contemporary Russian information operations, including those directed at Western political systems and public opinion, are often interpreted through this theoretical framework (Giles 2016b).

Although reflexive control originated in Soviet military theory, its underlying logic closely aligns with broader trends in cognitive and informational competition. By shaping how adversaries perceive reality rather than directly confronting them militarily, such strategies seek to achieve strategic effects at lower levels of escalation. In this sense, Russian reflexive control, Chinese information warfare doctrines, and Western concepts of influence operations reflect different expressions of a shared recognition that manipulating perception has become a central instrument of modern strategy.

The cognitive dimension of conflict is closely linked to the broader transformation of the information ecosystem. AI, big data analytics, and automated content generation allow actors to tailor influence campaigns with increasing precision. Algorithms can analyse large datasets to identify social divisions, political vulnerabilities, or emerging narratives within target

societies. These insights may then be used to design highly targeted messaging intended to amplify polarisation or weaken institutional legitimacy.

Advances in synthetic media further complicate this environment. AI-generated text, audio, and video, often referred to as deepfakes, may enable sophisticated disinformation campaigns that fabricate events or manipulate public perception in real time. While such technologies also have legitimate civilian applications, their potential misuse raises concerns about the erosion of trust in information sources and the difficulty of verifying authenticity during crises.

These developments present significant challenges for strategic governance. Democratic societies in particular face the dilemma of defending open information environments without undermining fundamental principles of freedom of expression. Efforts to counter disinformation must consequently balance security concerns with the preservation of democratic legitimacy.

From a strategic perspective, the cognitive battlespace reinforces the growing importance of societal resilience. If adversaries seek to manipulate perceptions and exploit internal divisions, societies' capacity to recognise, resist, and recover from such influence becomes an essential component of national defence. Public education, transparent governance, credible media institutions, and effective strategic communication thus play important roles in strengthening resilience against cognitive attacks.

Military institutions also play a role in this environment. Armed forces increasingly integrate information operations, cyber capabilities, and strategic communication into their operations planning. However, the cognitive dimension of warfare extends beyond traditional military structures and requires coordination across government agencies, private technology companies, and civil society organisations.

In this sense, the cognitive battlespace exemplifies the broader transformation of warfare discussed throughout this chapter. Future conflicts will likely involve complex interactions between physical operations, technological systems, economic pressure, and informational influence. Strategic success will depend not only on military capabilities but also on states' ability to maintain credible narratives, protect societal cohesion, and manage the informational environment in which political decisions are made.

The growing importance of the cognitive domain accordingly underscores a central theme of contemporary strategy: power increasingly operates through the interaction of material capability and perception. States that can shape how conflicts are understood, by their own populations, by allies, and by adversaries, may gain strategic advantages that extend far beyond the battlefield.

Conclusion

The preceding sections of this chapter examined several dimensions of the evolving character of warfare, including multidomain integration, AI, emerging technologies, economic mobilisation, and the cognitive battlespace. Taken together, these developments suggest that the future of military power will be defined less by isolated technological breakthroughs than by states' ability to integrate complex systems of capability, governance, and societal resilience.

One of the most significant implications of this transformation is the growing systemic nature of military competition. Modern armed forces increasingly operate within interconnected networks linking sensors, communication systems, industrial production, data infrastructures, and political decision-making processes. Military effectiveness therefore depends not only on

battlefield performance but also on the resilience and coherence of these wider strategic systems. States that integrate technological innovation, economic capacity, and institutional coordination will gain substantial advantages in future conflicts.

This systemic character reinforces the centrality of integration across domains and instruments of national power. Future military operations will likely involve simultaneous interaction across land, maritime, air, cyber, space, and informational environments. However, the effectiveness of MDOs will depend heavily on integrating military action with diplomatic, economic, technological, and informational instruments. Strategic success will consequently require close coordination between military institutions and the broader structures of national governance.

A second implication concerns the accelerating tempo of strategic interaction. Advances in sensing technologies, AI, and automated decision-support systems may compress the time available for political and military decision-making. In such environments, the ability to process information rapidly and translate situational awareness into coherent action may become a decisive advantage. At the same time, accelerated decision cycles increase the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation, particularly when automated systems interact in complex operating environments. Maintaining human oversight and robust governance mechanisms will then remain essential for preserving strategic stability.

Technological competition will also play a central role in shaping the future balance of power. AI, autonomous systems, advanced computing, space infrastructure, and quantum technologies may significantly influence military effectiveness over the coming decades. Yet technological superiority alone does not guarantee strategic success. History repeatedly demonstrates that the impact of military technology depends on the institutions, doctrines, and organisational structures through which it is employed. States that successfully adapt their military institutions to new technological realities will consequently gain advantages that extend beyond the mere possession of advanced systems.

Another key implication concerns the relationship between military power and societal resilience. As discussed earlier in the chapter, modern conflicts increasingly affect civilian infrastructure, digital networks, and economic systems. Military operations may be accompanied by cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion designed to weaken societal cohesion. Societies' ability to withstand disruption, maintain public trust, and sustain long-term strategic commitments thus becomes an important component of national defence.

The war in Ukraine again illustrates this dynamic. Ukrainian resistance has depended not only on military capability but also on political leadership, societal mobilisation, and sustained international support. These factors highlight a broader lesson: military effectiveness in modern conflict often depends on the interaction between armed forces and the political, economic, and social systems that sustain them.

Finally, the growing importance of perception and cognition suggests that future conflicts will increasingly involve competition over legitimacy, narratives, and strategic communication. Military actions will be interpreted in real time by domestic audiences, allies, and adversaries through a globalised information environment. As a result, the ability to shape how conflicts are understood may influence strategic outcomes as much as the ability to achieve tactical success on the battlefield.

These developments reinforce a central argument of this book: military power must be understood as part of a broader system of national power, not as an autonomous instrument of statecraft. Armed forces remain indispensable for deterrence, defence, and coercion, but their

effectiveness increasingly depends on integrating technological innovation, economic capacity, institutional governance, and societal resilience.

The future of warfare will therefore likely be characterised by persistent competition between complex strategic systems rather than by isolated military confrontations. States that can integrate multidomain capabilities, sustain technological and industrial capacity, and preserve political legitimacy will be better positioned to navigate this evolving strategic environment.

The developments discussed in this chapter suggest that the future of warfare will be shaped less by singular technological breakthroughs than by the interaction of technological innovation, institutional adaptation, and societal resilience. AI, MDOs, emerging weapons systems, economic competition, and cognitive influence all contribute to a strategic environment in which military effectiveness increasingly depends on integrating complex systems rather than dominating any single capability.

At the same time, the analysis reinforces a central theme of this book: military power remains inseparable from the broader structures of national power. Armed forces operate within political institutions, technological ecosystems, economic networks, and societal environments that shape their capacity to generate strategic effects. The future of warfare will thus depend not only on technological progress but also on states' ability to integrate military capabilities with effective governance, resilient societies, and coherent strategic leadership. These developments reinforce the importance of integrating military power with diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of national strategy.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for anticipating how military power may evolve in the coming decades. While the precise trajectory of future conflict cannot be predicted, the systemic character of modern strategy suggests that successful states will be those that can adapt their institutions, technologies, and societies to an increasingly complex and competitive strategic environment.

CONCLUSION

Restatement of the Research Problem

Military power remains one of the principal instruments through which states pursue, protect, and advance their political objectives. Its strategic importance, however, cannot be fully explained by the quantity of military forces, weapons, defence expenditure, or technological capabilities a state possesses. Although these resources constitute essential foundations of military capability, their strategic value depends on the ability to generate, integrate, sustain, employ, and adapt them within a broader political and strategic system.

This study has shown that military power is a multidimensional and relational phenomenon. Its strategic significance emerges from the interaction between the foundations on which military potential is built, the ways that potential is employed, the effectiveness with which military capabilities are converted into action and effects, and the strategic environment in which this interaction takes place. Military power is therefore not simply a matter of possessing military capabilities. It concerns the capacity to transform those capabilities into strategically relevant influence and effects in pursuit of political objectives.

This perspective is particularly important in a strategic environment characterised by persistent competition, multidomain interaction, rapid technological change, and increasing interdependence between military and non-military instruments of power. Under such conditions, military power cannot be considered in isolation from political authority, economic and industrial capacity, societal resilience, technological systems, alliances, information, and the broader institutional environment.

The study therefore did not aim to establish a single measure of military power or replace existing theories of strategy and power. Rather, it aimed to develop an analytical model that explains how the different dimensions of military power relate and how military potential is transformed into strategically relevant outcomes.

Answer to the Primary Research Question

The analysis presented in this study provides the basis for answering the overarching research question. The findings demonstrate how military power acquires strategic significance through the relationship between its foundations, employment, effectiveness, and the strategic environment in which it operates.

Primary Research Question: How does military power function as an instrument of strategy in contemporary systems of national and international power?

The study concludes that military power functions as an instrument of strategy through the interaction of structural foundations, functional employment, and strategic context, with military effectiveness determining the extent to which military potential translates into strategically relevant effects.

Military power acquires strategic meaning when political objectives connect to credible, usable military capabilities and when those capabilities are employed in ways appropriate to the strategic environment. Its strategic utility therefore depends not only on what military capabilities a state possesses, but also on how those capabilities are generated and sustained, how they are employed, how effectively they translate into action, and how their use interacts with the behaviour of other actors and developments across the strategic environment.

Military power consequently functions simultaneously as an instrument of force and an instrument of influence. It may produce strategic effects through the actual application of military force, but also through deterrence, coercion, signalling, presence, posturing, and the credible possibility of force. Its effectiveness is thus ultimately relational: it depends on the interaction between military capabilities, political objectives, institutional and societal conditions, adversarial behaviour, and the wider strategic context.

The answer to the primary research question therefore provides the central proposition of this study: military power is best understood not as a static possession of military capability, but as a dynamic capacity to convert military potential into strategically relevant influence and effects.

Answers to the Research Questions

The overarching research question is answered through five supporting research questions. Taken together, they address the principal analytical dimensions of military power examined in this study and clarify how its structural foundations, strategic uses, effectiveness, and transformation contribute to its functioning as an instrument of strategy.

RQ1: What structural foundations enable military power to generate and sustain strategic capability and influence?

The analysis demonstrates that the structural foundations of military power extend substantially beyond the material resources traditionally used to assess military strength. Personnel, equipment, defence expenditure, and technological capabilities provide essential resources, but their strategic value depends on the institutional, organisational, human, industrial, and societal conditions through which these resources are generated, integrated, sustained, and adapted. Military capability therefore emerges from the interaction of multiple structural components rather than from the accumulation of individual resources.

The findings further indicate that sustainability and adaptability are essential characteristics of these foundations. Capabilities that cannot be maintained, regenerated, adapted, or integrated into an effective institutional system may provide substantial short-term potential but limited long-term strategic value. Structural foundations must therefore be understood dynamically, since their strategic value depends also on the ability to reproduce and transform military potential in response to changing requirements and circumstances.

The answer to RQ1 is that military power derives its strategic potential from integrating material, human, organisational, technological, institutional, political, industrial, societal, and alliance-related foundations. Their strategic significance depends not simply on their presence, but on the capacity to integrate, sustain, adapt, and regenerate them as a coherent system.

RQ2: What forms of strategic use enable military power to influence political behaviour and achieve strategic objectives across the competition continuum?

The analysis demonstrates that military power is employed through a range of strategic mechanisms rather than through combat alone. The study identifies six broad categories of strategic use: defence, deterrence, compellence, posturing, offence, and miscellaneous uses. These categories should not, however, be understood as mutually exclusive forms of military activity. They may overlap, coexist, and operate simultaneously, reinforcing one another across the competition continuum.

Their strategic significance derives from their ability to influence the behaviour, perceptions, and calculations of relevant actors. Military power may therefore produce strategic effects through the actual use of force, but also through credible threats, military presence, signalling,

deterrent postures, coercive pressure, and other forms of strategic employment. The effect of a particular military activity consequently depends not only on its physical characteristics, but also on its political purpose, intended audience, communication, credibility, and the behaviour it seeks to influence.

The answer to RQ2 is therefore that military power functions through a portfolio of overlapping strategic uses that translate military capability into political influence. Their effectiveness depends on the coherence between military means, political objectives, intended effects, and the strategic context in which they are employed.

RQ3: What factors determine the effectiveness of military power in translating military capabilities into strategic outcomes?

The analysis shows that military capability and military effectiveness are not synonymous. Material capacity provides the resources from which military action can be generated, but effectiveness concerns the ability to transform those resources into successful operational and strategic outcomes. A force may possess substantial material capacity and nevertheless perform poorly because of deficiencies in training, doctrine, leadership, organisation, readiness, sustainment, or adaptation.

Moreover, operational effectiveness does not automatically result in strategic success. Strategic outcomes depend on the interaction between military performance and political objectives, adversarial behaviour, societal support, legitimacy, alliances, geography, and the wider strategic environment. Military effectiveness is therefore neither an intrinsic property of a military force nor a single measurable variable. It is a relational capacity that emerges from interactions among capabilities, institutions, leadership, employment, and context.

This also explains why military power cannot be adequately assessed through a single quantitative indicator. Measures of military resources and capabilities may provide important evidence of potential, but they cannot by themselves determine whether that potential can be converted into strategically meaningful effects.

The answer to RQ3 is consequently that military effectiveness determines the extent to which available military capabilities can be translated into usable military action and, under particular strategic conditions, into politically and strategically relevant outcomes. It therefore functions as the principal integrating mechanism between military potential, military employment, and strategic effect.

RQ4: How do strategic competition, multidomain interaction, and technological change affect the role and effectiveness of military power?

The analysis shows that contemporary strategic competition increasingly extends across multiple, interconnected domains, including the military, informational, technological, cyber, space, economic, and political environments. Military power therefore operates in a strategic environment where actions in one domain can affect the effectiveness and vulnerability of systems in others. The growing interdependence of these domains increases the importance of integration, resilience, interoperability, information, and decision-making.

Technological change reinforces this transformation, particularly through artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, advanced sensing, and networked command structures. Yet the findings do not support a technologically deterministic interpretation of military power. Technology expands military possibilities and changes the conditions under which military power can be generated and employed, but its strategic value remains dependent on doctrine,

organisational adaptation, economic and industrial capacity, political institutions, human decision-making, and societal resilience.

The contemporary strategic environment therefore makes military power more systemic. Military capabilities are increasingly embedded in wider networks of technological, economic, political, informational, and societal relationships. At the same time, these developments do not eliminate strategy's enduring characteristics. Political purpose, human agency, friction, uncertainty, competing wills, and adversarial adaptation continue to shape strategic outcomes.

The answer to RQ4 is therefore that contemporary strategic competition and technological change increasingly make military power systemic, multidomain, interconnected, and continuously adaptive. At the same time, they do not eliminate the enduring importance of political purpose, human decision-making, friction, uncertainty, and adversarial adaptation.

RQ5: How can these relationships be integrated into a coherent analytical model for understanding military power in the twenty-first century?

The findings from the preceding research questions demonstrate that military power cannot be adequately explained through any single analytical dimension. Its structural foundations explain the generation and sustainability of military potential; its functional dimension explains how that potential is employed; and its strategic dimension explains the environment in which military power operates and the conditions under which it can influence political behaviour and strategic outcomes.

These relationships provide the basis for integrating the findings into a single analytical model. The model connects three analytically distinct but interdependent dimensions - structural, functional, and strategic - while treating military effectiveness as the mechanism that connects military potential and employment with strategic effects.

The answer to RQ5 is consequently that the relationships identified in the study can be integrated into a coherent Structural–Functional–Strategic Analytical Model in which structural foundations generate potential, functional employment translates potential into strategic action, and the strategic environment conditions the effectiveness and consequences of that action.

Synthesis of the Answers to the Research Questions

Taken together, the answers to the five supporting research questions form a cumulative analytical argument. Each question addresses a different aspect of military power, and together they provide the basis for the integrated model developed by the study. Table 1 summarises the relationship among the questions and their respective analytical functions.

Table 1: Relationship among the questions and their respective analytical functions

Research question	Principal analytical argument	Analytical function
RQ1: Structural Foundations	What military power is built upon	Structural potential
RQ2: Strategic Uses	How military power is employed	Functional employment
RQ3: Military Effectiveness	What makes military employment effective	Integrating mechanism
RQ4: Strategic Competition, Multidomain Interaction, and Technological Change	Under what contemporary conditions does military power operate	Strategic environment

RQ5: Integration into an Analytical Model	How these relationships fit together	Analytical integration
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The resulting analytical logic can therefore be expressed as a progression from potential, through employment and effectiveness, towards strategic effect. Structural foundations create military potential; functional employment converts that potential into strategic action; military effectiveness determines the quality of this conversion; and the strategic environment conditions its consequences. RQ5 integrates these relationships into the Structural–Functional–Strategic Analytical Model developed by this study.

The Integrated Structural–Functional–Strategic Analytical Model

The study's central analytical result is the integration of the three dimensions of military power into a single model. The structural dimension addresses the foundations that generate and sustain military potential. The functional dimension addresses how this potential is employed to pursue political and strategic objectives. The strategic dimension addresses the broader environment in which military power operates and the conditions that shape interactions among military action, political objectives, and the behaviour of other actors.

The model does not treat these dimensions as independent or sequential stages in a strictly linear process. Rather, they represent analytically distinct but continuously interacting dimensions of military power. Structural conditions influence functional possibilities; functional employment can expose weaknesses or generate requirements for structural adaptation; and the strategic environment shapes both the employment and development of military capabilities.

Within this relationship, military effectiveness constitutes the integrating mechanism. It determines the extent to which structural potential can be transformed through functional employment into strategically meaningful effects. Effectiveness therefore connects what a state possesses with what it can do and, ultimately, with what it can achieve. The core analytical relationship can be expressed as:

Structural potential → Functional employment → Strategic effect

Military effectiveness operates across this relationship by determining the extent to which potential is successfully converted into action and action into strategically relevant outcomes. The relationship is therefore neither automatic nor deterministic. Political objectives, institutional capacity, leadership, doctrine, organisation, societal support, technological and industrial capabilities, alliances, geography, adversarial behaviour, and the wider strategic environment condition it.

The model therefore offers a way to move beyond assessments that equate military power with aggregate resources or capabilities. Instead, it emphasises converting potential into strategic effect. This conversion is the study's central analytical problem.

The Relationship among the Three Dimensions

The structural, functional, and strategic dimensions should not be interpreted as separate components that can be assessed independently and then simply added together. Their significance emerges from their interaction.

The structural dimension provides the potential for military action. Without adequate human, material, organisational, technological, institutional, industrial, societal, and alliance

foundations, military power cannot be generated or sustained over time. Yet structural potential does not constitute strategic power on its own.

The functional dimension represents the employment of that potential. It connects capabilities with political purposes through defence, deterrence, compellence, posturing, offence, and other forms of strategic use. Functional employment determines how military capabilities are converted into action and influence. Yet military employment alone does not guarantee strategic success.

The strategic dimension provides the context within which military power acquires meaning and produces consequences. Strategic competition, multidomain interaction, technological change, political relationships, alliances, societal conditions, and adversarial adaptation all shape the possibilities and limitations of military power.

Military effectiveness connects these dimensions. It determines whether structural potential can translate into effective employment and whether that employment can contribute to achieving strategic objectives. Effectiveness is therefore best understood as an integrating mechanism rather than as a separate fourth dimension of military power.

This relationship also explains why military power is dynamic. Changes in the strategic environment can alter the requirements imposed on military structures; new forms of employment can create new capability requirements; technological change can transform both structures and functions; and operational experience can generate demands for institutional and organisational adaptation. Military power must consequently be continuously generated, employed, assessed, adapted, and regenerated.

The model thus captures military power as a dynamic system rather than a static inventory of capabilities.

Scientific Contribution

The study's principal scientific contribution is the development of a Structural–Functional–Strategic Analytical Model of military power. The model provides an integrated analytical perspective that connects the foundations of military potential, its strategic employment, and the strategic environment in which it produces effects. The contribution consists of several interrelated elements.

First, the study advances a multidimensional conceptualisation of military power that extends beyond material resources and conventional measures of military strength. It shows that military power emerges from the interaction of material, human, organisational, technological, institutional, political, industrial, societal, and alliance-related foundations.

Second, the study establishes an analytical distinction between military potential and military employment. Possessing capabilities and employing them strategically represent different analytical problems. This distinction makes it possible to examine not only what military power consists of, but also how it is converted into strategic action.

Third, the study conceptualises military effectiveness as an integrating mechanism rather than as a separate dimension or simple quantitative attribute. This links military potential, military employment, and strategic outcomes and highlights the relational and context-dependent character of effectiveness.

Fourth, the study incorporates strategic competition, multidomain interaction, and technological change into the analysis of military power without reducing its development to

technological factors. This allows the model to account for the increasingly systemic character of contemporary strategic competition while retaining the enduring importance of political purpose, human agency, friction, uncertainty, and adversarial adaptation.

Finally, the study integrates these relationships into a higher-order analytical model. The model is not intended to replace established theories of strategy, international relations, deterrence, coercion, or military effectiveness. Its contribution lies instead in providing a coherent structure through which these perspectives and their relevant variables can be related when analysing military power as an instrument of strategy.

The study's scientific contribution therefore lies primarily in integrating relationships that are often examined separately. The Structural–Functional–Strategic Analytical Model provides a conceptual framework for examining how military potential is generated, employed, converted into action and effects, and how the strategic environment conditions this process.

Implications for Strategic Practice

The analytical findings also have implications for assessing and developing military power in practice.

First, strategic assessments should avoid equating military strength with the quantity of platforms, personnel, expenditure, or technological capabilities. Such indicators remain important, but they represent only part of military potential. Assessments should also consider institutional quality, readiness, leadership, doctrine, training, sustainment, industrial capacity, societal resilience, political legitimacy, alliance relationships, and adaptability.

Furthermore, military power development should be approached as a systemic process. Investments in individual capabilities may have limited strategic value if they lack appropriate organisational structures, personnel, doctrine, logistics, command arrangements, technological infrastructure, and industrial capacity. Strategic capability therefore depends on the coherence of the broader system in which individual capabilities are embedded.

Next, military power should be employed with explicit attention to the relationship between political objectives, military means, and intended strategic effects. Possessing military capabilities does not automatically establish their strategic utility. Strategic employment requires credible objectives, appropriate means, clear communication, political resolve, and an understanding of how adversaries and other relevant actors are likely to respond.

In the same vein, the increasing multidomain character of strategic competition requires military organisations to develop the capacity to integrate military action with activities and capabilities across other domains and instruments of power. Command and control, information, cyber, space, technology, economic resources, civil–military relationships, and alliance interoperability increasingly contribute to military effectiveness.

Finally, the analysis suggests treating adaptability and resilience as central characteristics of military power. In an environment characterised by technological change, persistent competition, compressed decision cycles, and adversarial adaptation, strategic advantage depends not only on existing capabilities but also on the ability to learn, adapt, regenerate, and sustain military power under changing conditions.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The analytical model developed in this study necessarily has limitations. Military power is a complex, context-dependent phenomenon, and no conceptual model can capture all its variables

or causal relationships. The Structural–Functional–Strategic Model therefore represents an analytical abstraction intended to structure understanding rather than a deterministic predictive model.

A further limitation concerns measuring the relationships represented by the model. Although the study identifies the principal dimensions and their interactions, it cannot reduce the conversion of military potential into strategic effects to a universal quantitative formula. Strategic outcomes remain influenced by uncertainty, adversarial adaptation, political decisions, and contextual factors that cannot be fully controlled or predicted.

These limitations also indicate several directions for further research. Future studies could operationalise individual elements of the model and empirically examine their relationships across different states, conflicts, and strategic environments. Comparative research could investigate how different political, institutional, societal, and industrial systems affect the generation and sustainability of military potential. Further research could also examine the relationship between military effectiveness and strategic outcomes through historical case studies, comparative analysis, or quantitative and mixed-method approaches.

Attention may also be given to the changing relationship between technological innovation and military power, including artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, space systems, and advanced information technologies. Such research could explore how technological change affects not only military capabilities but also organisational structures, decision-making, strategic employment, resilience, and escalation.

The model should therefore be understood as a basis for further analytical and empirical development rather than as a final or exhaustive theory of military power.

Final Synthesis

The central conclusion of this study is that military power is more than the possession of military capability; it is the capacity to convert capability into strategically relevant influence and effects.

Structural foundations provide the potential. Functional employment provides the means of strategic action. Strategic context determines the conditions and consequences of that action. Military effectiveness connects these dimensions and determines the extent to which potential becomes credible, usable, sustainable, and strategically relevant military power.

This relationship is dynamic, not linear. Structural foundations shape the possibilities for employment; employment generates effects and experience that can require structural adaptation; and changes in the strategic environment continuously alter both the requirements and the consequences of military power. Military power is therefore not a static attribute of the state but a continuously evolving relationship between resources, institutions, human agency, strategic choices, and the environment in which those choices are made.

The analysis further demonstrates that the growing importance of multidomain interaction and technological change does not diminish the fundamental political character of military power. Technology may expand capabilities, accelerate decision-making, and transform the conduct of military operations, but it does not remove political purpose, competing will, uncertainty, friction, or adversarial adaptation. Military power remains ultimately meaningful because it serves political objectives.

Military power in the twenty-first century should therefore be understood neither as a collection of platforms nor as a single measurable quantity. It is a dynamic, systemic, relational, and

context-dependent instrument of strategy. The Structural–Functional–Strategic Analytical Model developed in this study offers a coherent way to understand this relationship by connecting the foundations of military potential, its strategic employment, the mechanism of military effectiveness, and the strategic environment in which military power generates consequences.

In this sense, the strategic value of military power lies not simply in what a state possesses, but in what it can generate, sustain, employ, adapt, and ultimately achieve through that power.

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