



Strategic Army

Developing Trust in the Shifting Strategic Landscape

By Emily Bienvenue and Zachary Rogers

While the nature of war remains a battle of political wills, discontinuous change in the strategic landscape is constantly changing the way in which warfare is conducted.¹ Expedited by the speed

and scope of technological change, the age of information warfare (IW) is well upon us.² While the impact of technological change on operational and strategic maneuverability in the physical battlespace is comparatively

well understood, the impact of complex interwoven technological and social trends on the nature of conflict and the threat posed to the rules-based global order are less so.

The intentions of this article are twofold. First, it aims to improve understanding of the nature of change in the operating environment. Emerging from technological change is a strategic war against trust—trust in the open rules-based system and the sociopolitical systems of its key players. Authoritarian states such as China and Russia, for whom a level of revision of the existing order is a key strategic interest, are contending to rewrite, disrupt, or block the preferred narratives of the Western liberal democracies such as Australia’s by sowing seeds of distrust within and without of their hyper-connected societies. Four interlocking features of the emergent operating environment

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drive this change: the shift from vertical to horizontal networks of power, expansion of the cognitive battlespace, constant and unrestricted warfare, and the erosion of trust in traditional centralized institutions. In the digital era, state and nonstate actors alike exploit and manipulate information for commercial and strategic effect. Power flows among a diversity of actors connected through horizontal networks, in which the state's—and other traditional institutions'—roles and capacities to channel that power are disrupted.³ The lines between the civilian and military domains and the conditions of peace and war are indistinguishable. The contemporary canter of warfare, considered as both violent and nonviolent contending with others for political gain, is now a constant between and across whole societies.⁴ Chaos and disorder in the information domain undermine functionality in the Western liberal institutional tradition and degrade the basis of authority, legitimacy, and trust in the rules-based order.⁵

Second, this article asserts that trust, characterized by its relational nature, is the connective tissue that provides legitimacy and authority to the promise and functionality of openness and rule-making. It enables the acceptance of a level of vulnerability associated with open systems.⁶ This relational trust offers us an advantage over adversaries that cooperate on a more transactional and calculative basis, and is thus an underrecognized strategic resource. Without trust and the normative principles and institutions that provide a plausible narrative for the rules-based global order, those who support and benefit from an open system risk strategic defeat below the threshold of conventional conflict.⁷ To default to the employment of the offensive strategies of our adversaries, what Joseph Nye has termed “sharp power,”⁸ is to risk forfeiting one of our most valuable strategic resources.⁹ In addition, it is to play into the strategic strengths of adversary actors for whom the incumbent international order and its underpinnings of relational trust between allied partners are the primary competitive threat.

Shifting Contours of the Strategic Landscape

In 2004, the Australian army released a future operating concept. Written by Lieutenant Colonel David Kilcullen, “Complex Warfighting” described a “changing landscape in which [globalization] has created and empowered a diverse range of enemies of the west; and U.S. dominance . . . has caused those adversaries to seek asymmetric arenas and unconventional means to confront the west.” Kilcullen’s analysis of the operating environment and the evolving character of warfare centered around four longstanding trends: complexity, lethality, diversity, and diffusion of warfare. For Kilcullen, however, ongoing changes in the operating environment and the nature of warfare resided “in the unpredictable, ambiguous, and highly complex manner in which the trends interact, not in each trend itself.”¹⁰ Subsequent doctrine sketched the contours of such complexity, describing an operating environment “that is more than the physical environment.”¹¹ However, the ongoing preoccupation with the modernization of technology as a means to maintain relative advantage in the physical battlespace neglects the deeply complex social changes Kilcullen was referring to.

Drawing on lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, in 2006 Robert Scales purported that victory in the wars of the future would be decided by human and cultural factors. According to Scales, Iraq and Afghanistan indicated that it would be not technological superiority but rather the capacity to capture the perceptions and minds of populations that would determine victory on the battlefield.¹² The idea that war is not simply an engineering problem is not new. Scales goes beyond this understanding of warfare, claiming that human and cultural factors are decisive factors in battle. Indeed, close combat capabilities would remain a key function of an army that would have to contend with violent conflict; however, these capabilities would be insufficient to achieve strategic effect in the future war for minds.

Today, major shifts in the strategic landscape suggest that the narrative of liberal internationalism and the associated global governance model is under great strain. In place since 1945, the rules-based global order has been underwritten by the primacy of U.S. material power and principles of democracy, transparency, and openness as reflected and reinforced by national and global institutions. These pillars of the postwar order do not exist in isolation. Superior military and economic resources manifest as strategic power only when translated through the institutions able to convert the resource into the preferred strategic outcome. The capacity for the translation of resources into preferred strategic outcomes has been dependent on not only the maintenance of material superiority but also the sustainment of the enabling narrative.¹³

Through a combination of relative decline in material superiority and accumulating challenges to the narrative, the capacity for translation has been eroding for the United States for some time, marked by many scholars of the international order as far back as 1973 and beyond.¹⁴ This decline has continued and accelerated in recent times, as major signs of fragility in the order marked by financial crises, breakdown of international consensus and cooperation, and security crises have proliferated since 2001. In addition, the digital age has ushered in new threats that have not only created a new terrain of competitive interactions but have also distorted existing orientations regarding competition and conflict. A major development has been the capacity of opponents of the existing order to cause disruption and dysfunction in its supporting narrative while pursuing material gains in other ways.¹⁵

Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections marks the manifestation and convergence of these trends. Fragility in the global order has given way to upheaval. As major reorientation of the global order is under way, states are being forced to adapt to the rapidly changing environment while seeking to preserve features of the order aligned with their strategic interests. For Australia, its interests remain tied to the material superiority



Iraqi security forces conduct wreath-laying ceremony at Tomb of Unknown Soldier as part of Third International Conference to Counter Daesh Propaganda and Ideology, in Baghdad, Iraq, December 13, 2017 (U.S. Army/Von Marie Donato)

of allied military and economic resources coupled with an institutional narrative of openness to cross-border trade and investment, the preservation of stability and security, and an emphasis on consensual and rules-based international governance. While global shifts in material power are forces outside of Australia's control, the sustainment and propagation of its preferred institutional narrative can be significantly influenced by whole-of-government actions.

This process is dependent on trust. It is trust that allows both individuals and states to commit to institutions in an environment of imperfect information and underpins the narratives that sustain them over time. Disinformation and uncertainty in the age of cognitive warfare present a direct threat to these processes and capacities to maintain and renew the institutions and norms that underwrite the rules-based global order.¹⁶ Adversarial attempts to precipitate the erosion of trust are an attack on the connective

tissue of allied strategic power. The erosion of trust must not be met with a retreat from trust; rather, it brings to the fore the centrality of *relational* trust as a strategic resource of allied systems and the paucity of trust in adversary systems.¹⁷ Relational trust cultivation is the counter to adversary *transactional*-based relationships, which represent a vector of long-term strategic advantage that requires greater acknowledgment.

Nathan Freier and Jonathan Dagle of the U.S. Army War College have identified the challenge presented by an era of hyper-competition to the values of openness and liberalism:

Russia and China create the worst possible Faustian choices for U.S. public- and private-sector leaders. On the one hand: choose to stick to the core values that define the United States—a rules-based international order, truth and candor, free speech, free markets, free enterprise, etc.—and see those values exploited at U.S. expense. On

*the other hand: compromise those values to wrestle in the mud with rivals, and hazard erosion of the hard-won principles that have for so long separated the United States and other liberal democracies from their authoritarian adversaries.*¹⁸

This challenge is evident across a number of theaters of below-the-threshold conflict around the world. Gregory Poling reports on China extending its influence in the South China Sea not through its often cited military modernization but through its “weaponized” counter-narrative of victimization at the hands of European and Asian powers.¹⁹ Digital platforms provide new opportunities for China to transmit this narrative not only to its domestic population but also to the region and beyond. China's narrative depicts the United States and its allies as a destabilizing force in the region and serves to propagate the belief that the U.S.-led security architecture, long synonymous with a rules-based global order,

is merely a euphemism for its hegemony, not a guarantee of security and stability for the region.

A more unilateralist foreign policy under Trump and a reduction of U.S. hard power in the region play to China's counternarrative. This metanarrative provides a façade for the People's Liberation Army's incremental territorial gains in the South China Sea. By targeting the morality of U.S. strategy, it challenges the normative basis for the "rules-based global order" without which the United States and other members of the regional system of alliances, most notably Australia, cannot exercise their material power. As noted by U.S. Air Force Intelligence and Information Operations Officer Jon Herrmann, "When a narrative, as a key example of information power, falters, other forms of power also falter."²⁰ As a number of scholars, officials, and commentators have also noted, a further refined and targeted version of this strategy is likely to migrate further south to the South Pacific and the strategically pivotal countries to Australia's north.²¹

From Vertical to Horizontal Networks of Power

The future of governance in the immediate region and elsewhere is uncertain. It cannot be predicted, and efforts to reconstitute it must be cognizant of complexity, as the nature of these changes is inherently discontinuous and nonlinear.²² This disruption is driven by four interlocking characteristics of the age of digital information networks, detailed below. The ubiquity of information in the digital era has caused a diffusion of power among a diversity of actors in the international system. However, as indicated in Kilcullen's 2004 *Complex Warfighting* operating concept, while the increased diversity of actors is not a new trend, it is how these actors wield power through flattened power structures that represents a marked change.²³ In the unfolding strategic context, power no longer strictly flows through vertical hierarchical institutions upon which sits the state, but rather flows horizontally through complex networks in which

the role of the state and its ability to exercise power is unclear.²⁴ Individuals, social groups, organizations, and state actors as distinct and indistinct entities and in side-by-side relationships are involved in the transmission of ideas and the exploitation and manipulation of information as a means to gain strategic advantage. As a number of authors attest, IW waged through these horizontal networks upsets the balance of power as its means do not favor the traditional remit of vertically hierarchical conventional militaries.²⁵ In the information domain, advantage is hard to achieve and maintain as "a narrative can now deploy in a rapid-fire series of mutually reinforcing stories that are hard for people to disregard and reach a global audience in seconds at minimal costs."²⁶ Furthermore, the rapid deployment of narratives can create chaos and undermine the rules-based global order and those that stand in support of it.²⁷

China has conducted a concerted information campaign through statements of senior officials and state-owned media outlets to develop a narrative of victimization and rightful historical ownership of land features in the South China Sea.²⁸ This narrative is intended to foster perceptions that China's extension of power into the South China Sea is a defensive measure, and therefore the behaviors of those contesting China's actions are offensive. At the same time, little information has been released to the public from U.S. intelligence agencies regarding China's activities, further facilitating China's own narrative.²⁹ Operatives of the Russian Internet Research Agency, a Kremlin-associated group run by oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, exploited existing partisanship and disenfranchisement in the U.S. political system.³⁰ Their use of fake profiles on social media platforms, including but not limited to Twitter and Facebook, to spread suspicions against key political figures, namely within the Democratic Party, was a highly effective, yet unseen offensive against American democracy.³¹ Before Russia, militant extremist group al Shabaab, and later the so-called Islamic State, used a wide range of social media platforms to transmit its

propaganda and amplify its voice to construct a narrative of religious superiority and moral higher order to support calls for jihad.³²

Expansion of the Cognitive Battlespace

Corresponding with the expansion of digital horizontal networks, the cognitive battlespace has expanded dramatically while eluding formal characterization within military and intelligence communities. The shifts in the strategic landscape suggest its time has come and a cogent definition and lexicon are now overdue. IW is an enduring feature of warfare. Early 1990s conceptualizations of IW viewed it as a component of the overall military battlespace and as a convergence of separate lines of effort that included all elements of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, electronic warfare, psychological operations, and cyber operations. However, a unity of effort under a unified theory of IW did not materialize, and the elements of IW continued to develop and evolve as more or less distinct operational efforts supplementary to kinetic effects.³³ Concepts of "cognitive warfare" were introduced but remained indistinct from the broader IW discussion within military and intelligence communities.³⁴ A brief overview of the cognitive battlespace and cognitive warfare is offered below.

Broadly speaking, *cognition* describes the mental process by which information is transformed into knowledge and knowledge into understanding.³⁵ As early discussions of IW pointed out, human understanding of the battlespace is the essence of situational awareness and the basis of strategic decisionmaking and action.³⁶ Contests for information assurance and security involving attempts to deny, degrade, and destroy adversary information have always occurred in a "cognitive battlespace." These efforts now include but are not exhausted by all the elements of IW mentioned, and thus involve both human and cyber systems and dissolve the civil-military divide. The point of departure is in the exploding use of computers as persuasive technologies—the set of practices termed *captology* by Stanford



U.S. troopers, assigned to A Battery, Field Artillery Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, raise assembled radio antenna to enable field communications during Operation *Chosin* at 7th Army Joint Multinational Training Command's Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, January 28, 2015 (U.S. Army/Gertrud Zach)

University's B.J. Fogg in 1997.³⁷ It is by way of the uniquely persistent, proximal, and continuous forms of contending availed by digital technologies, accessing the minds of others anonymously and from extended range, that IW efforts have merged into an expanded cognitive domain. These contests taken as a whole amount to "cognitive warfare," the sum of which is greater than its individual parts, and where the unintended side effects of intended persuasive activities are unpredictable and emergent. Effects in the cognitive battlespace have the capacity to alter the context of situational awareness, thus rendering it incomplete. Incomplete situational awareness can reflect an orientation toward information that obscures its meaning. Capabilities deployed under a false orientation cannot achieve the desired strategic effect. Worse still, the capacity to recognize and adapt to the shifting circumstances can be thwarted.

Cognitive warfare is an enduring feature of the existing and future operating

environment. By connecting all domains, it blurs distinctions between war and peace and operational levels. The unification of lines of effort and effects under preexisting IW constructs has been forced on operators by a combination of the shifting strategic circumstances and by the efforts and activities of not only adversaries but also private-sector captology practices with no malignant intent, effectively creating a new terrain. The transformative impact of the weaponization of the cognitive domain extends well beyond existing conceptualizations of the problem space. In turn, the erosion and delegitimization of the liberal internationalist narrative change the context in which the United States and its allies may seek to exercise kinetic power. This terrain and its informational content connect the traditional physical domains of warfare to human systems, and there is no firewall dividing civil and military domains and no sentinel currently protecting the domestic population. Sophisticated and coordinated

information operations traversing this terrain are poised to target the political, cultural, and moral centers of gravity of society, leveraging all elements of the connectivity, reach, and persistence of the medium.

No better example to date exists than the Russian manipulation of various social media platforms in the 2016 U.S. election, acknowledged on July 3, 2018, by the U.S. Select Senate Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) report, which confirmed the U.S. Intelligence Community Assessment produced in January 2017.³⁸ Having foreseen "the broad impact of technology on the battlespace," Russia has effectively leveraged the shift to horizontal information networks and the expansion of gray-zone warfare.³⁹

While very much in its formative stages, U.S.-based military and intelligence communities have begun to develop a lexicon for cognitive war that contains analogies with elements of traditional kinetic warfare.⁴⁰ From these

early conceptualizations, the concept of information effects is being refined. The advent of hyper-connectivity has added the carefully tailored narrative to the arsenal of information effects.⁴¹ The narrative, injected into the information cycle at the critical time, can be described as a form of “cognitive fire.” Cognitive fires are now precision-guided, and the kill chain is transversal. Cognitive fires emit a “narrative signature” in the electromagnetic spectrum, analogous to an aircraft wing in the radio spectrum or a combustion engine in infrared.⁴² To an extent, they can be identified and tracked. However, when a weaponized narrative leaps inevitably from cyberspace into analogue physical space, its signature gets disseminated and, in many cases seen recently, its effects both intended and unintended can be exponentially magnified. This exponential payoff in effects is what defines cognitive fires as a strategic weapon of unprecedented power. The Russian information operations identified in the SSCI report benefited precisely from this payoff. The strategic ramifications, therefore, are not limited in the same way as adversaries’ employment of high-tech weaponry or the cyber warfare targeting of command and control of deployed armed forces. The strategic implications extend to the vulnerable cognitive fabric of the open society from which the armed forces of liberal democracies draw the entirety of their resources.

Constant, Unrestricted, and Unbounded Warfare

As the cognitive battlespace expands, the strategic threshold, once determined as a discernible point on a linear continuum by traditional markers of conflict escalation, now transverses a multidimensional nonlinear matrix of competition and conflict. In the cognitive battlespace, lines demarcating civil and military spaces and conditions of peace and war are being blurred and reconstituted. Adversary lines of effort are increasingly aimed below a threshold at which conventional combat capabilities would be engaged. Both Russia and China have employed integrated

military and nonmilitary mechanisms aimed directly at the strategic level, bypassing operational level campaigns, which extend beyond the limits of the physical battlespace.⁴³ Iran’s constant, unrestricted, and unbounded warfare strategy leverages Hizballah to cause societal and political chaos for its adversaries.⁴⁴ This strategy, bypassing the strengths and authority of traditional militaries, is not the preserve of militaries but is open to all. As Clint Watts suggests, the concern now should be how everyone, state and nonstate, might seek to employ similar strategies and the consequences of mass chaos in a world in which the capacity to distinguish truth from fiction is in precipitous decline.⁴⁵

This strategy is intentionally designed to play to the weaknesses of Western liberal democracies by attacking their soft underbelly.⁴⁶ Military and legal responses to adversaries’ efforts that blur the line between militaries and civilian populations and acts of war debilitate liberal democratic norms and principles of international law. Effective responses must be oriented to reflect this blurring and reconstitution of the relevant battlespace.⁴⁷ The integrated incorporation of informational effects with physical effects, in both offensive and defensive contexts, can orient the armed forces toward the “cognitive main effort” they will require while defending the peace as well as to fight and win in the future operating environment. A cognitive main effort requires whole-of-government coordination and support, and will require significant organizational adjustment within the Australian Defence Organisation.⁴⁸

Erosion of Trust in Western Liberal Democratic Institutions

The dislocation of states from their traditional hierarchies and the failure of governance are both caused by and enforce the erosion of ideas, norms, and trust upon which the Westphalian state and rules-based order are predicated. The loss of trust in centralized Western liberal democratic institutions and their ability to govern after the 2007–2008

global financial crisis is now exacerbated by the advent of peer-to-peer digital platforms, including but not limited to social media, through which ideas about the failure of Western democratic institutions and decentralized self-governance models are transmitted. Soon, distributed ledger technology, commonly known as “blockchain,” will add new and novel variances to the human-computer interface as institutions such as banks, governments, and corporations seek a secure foothold out of what is widely recognized as a rogue cyber domain.⁴⁹ These and other technology-driven changes represent radical and untested interventions in analogue systems of trust.

According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, the trust that was dislocated from vertical liberal democratic institutions to digital platforms is now also in decline as the findings of the Robert Mueller investigation are made public and people come to realize that the person they correspond with via these networks may not be a “peer” but rather a bot.⁵⁰ How trust in a post-truth world will be reconstituted in horizontal networks and the role of the state within are yet to be determined.⁵¹ At the same time, the 2018 Edelman barometer shows that trust of a different type—transactional in nature—has increased in authoritarian systems, most notably China, which now holds the number-one trust rank. Here the broader implications of proliferating disinformation activities are clear. Not only battles *for trust*, but contests *of trust*, to reorient its meaning between different political-economic systems—democratic and authoritarian—characterize this strategic contest. Leading scholars from the intelligence, military, and academic communities are recognizing this fundamental shift: “The most prominent operations of the last year—Russian attempts to undermine the 2016 American Presidential election through the hacking of the Democratic National Committee, the release of emails, and the use of fake Facebook and Twitter accounts—were designed to undermine trust in institutions through manipulation, distortion, and disruption.”⁵²



IBM's Watson for Cyber Security uses cognitive capabilities to improve cyber security investigations (IBM/John Mottern)

Developing Trust to Navigate Uncertainty in the Cognitive Battlespace

The future of global governance and the Western liberal democratic model is yet to be determined and may be in a state of contested reconstitution indefinitely. The interplay of social and technological trends, from which the threat to the strategic narrative and global governance model emerges, is characteristically nonlinear and therefore cannot be predicted, and plays out below a threshold in which the attention and resources required to respond are likely not forthcoming from highly distracted societies and government institutions. This is fundamentally because the interplay is occurring within complex and multifaceted human and nonhuman systems about which we as observers have inherently imperfect knowledge. The threat is by its nature an orientation challenge, driven by the complexity in the speed and scope of change. This means that the more immediate strategic problem for the Australian army is not in meeting a peer adversary on the conventional battlefield, which is a low-probability, high-impact operational and tactical scenario, but the uncertainty of governance, stability, and peace

at both local and global levels in the face of contending narratives that erode the incumbent social-political settlement upon which civil peace—domestic and international—is predicated. *Relational* trust, therefore—the voluntary acceptance of a level of vulnerability in the presence of pervasive uncertainty—is a strategic resource that represents the connective tissue of Australian and allied power, and it requires acknowledgment and cultivation as a type of “immunity boost” for sociopolitical stability and sustainability, not retreat and abandonment.⁵³

Trust cultivation and prioritization are active strategies to reestablish the conditions in which preferred supporting narratives can be forwarded. Without the trust component, the narrative and associated order become one of reactive self-interest and short-term transactionalism, which provides benefits to the highest bidder and the most materially endowed. Power and influence become a numbers game, one that would offer particular benefits to authoritarian adversaries. Building trust avoids succumbing to an attempt to directly counter the strategic aims of the adversary, which further erodes the fabric of open societies and works to alter the rules of the game

to adversary advantage. It provides the heuristic needed to underpin the necessary unified narrative to coordinate joint and whole-of-government activities—for example, international engagement, information operations, IW, and psychological operations—in the cognitive battlespace and the means to deny the adversary strategic space gained through “information fratricide,” a consequence of discordant strategic messaging. Coherence can only be achieved as a product of strategic engagement that augments and aligns existing disparate lines of effort conducted under the auspices of a cognitive main effort. Without the coherence of narrative provided by trust, the cognitive main effort succumbs to an analogue of blue-on-blue conflict, to use kinetic terms.

For an army, this requires a reorientation of its international engagement strategy as an ad hoc line of effort in support of kinetic operations. The development of relational trust requires *strategic* engagement—enduring in nature and coordinated for a unified strategic message as the U.S. Echelons Above Brigade (EAB) concept concurs. U.S. Army efforts in this regard are well advanced. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-3-8, published December 6, 2018, details how the Service’s EAB concept can better support operations across the “competition continuum,” with particular focus on persistent competition below the threshold of armed conflict, with irregular and unconventional combatants and capabilities, and emphasizes the pervasive cognitive element,⁵⁴ as described above. It envisions persistent and continuous EAB formations and commanders as *never ceding the initiative*, being *anticipatory* rather than reactive, and remaining *skeptical* of their own understanding throughout a campaign or operation due to the inherent complexity of the contemporary battlefield.⁵⁵ Acknowledging the significant civil-military cooperation required to achieve these ambitious goals, Assad Raza and Jerritt Lynn argue that EAB formations must be complemented by a unified civil affairs regiment under the joint command of the communities

of interest they represent within the armed forces, which can nonetheless carry forward the government's strategic intent. According to Raza and Lynn, the envisioned U.S. Joint Civil-Military Operations Center would serve as an

*operational- to strategic-level organization to maintain continuous coordination with interagency partners, [which] would facilitate cooperation with interagency partners in areas of common interest, promote a common civil operational picture, and enable sharing of critical information and resources to support population-centric operations, [providing] commanders a unique capability to help resolve population-centric problems that could negatively impact military and civilian efforts.*⁵⁶

The concept is closely aligned with the "cognitive main effort" we describe above and expressed in our recommendation for the role of strategic engagement within the Australian army.⁵⁷

To achieve this outcome and meet strategic guidance would require a significant change in the role of the army, which would need to be articulated in the Australian army's operating concepts. Close combat capabilities will remain a cornerstone of the remit of Australian Land Forces. Modernization programs should be maintained to sustain a combat capability. At the same time, the army could expand upon elements of its traditional remit to support whole-of-government efforts to address the growing strategic vacuum that exists below the threshold of conventional armed conflict. This would involve a paradigm shift from the traditional notion of top-down military-to-military and civil-military cooperation to allow for new forms of bottom-up and side-by-side cooperation, which leverage a coherent strategic narrative to introduce a cognitive main effort to the army's remit. This requires a prioritization of strategic engagement specialists trained specifically with the appropriate skill sets within a dedicated force structure construct.⁵⁸

This proposal represents a paradigm shift for the Australian army. Relational trust develops over time, through

deepened and sustained civil-military and military-to-military interactions, from the bottom up and side by side across levels of society. Furthermore, the army's efforts to build trust as a counter to adversaries should also be directed internally within Australia, as there is no firewall dividing the narrative the army needs to project overseas and the narrative it needs to project domestically. Leveraging trust as a strategic resource requires sustained commitment and focus. It should be treated as part of the Australian army's core business rather than as "accessories that serve military requirements,"⁵⁹ or the remit of the special forces.

Here the opportunity exists for the army to lead the strategic response to develop trust between Australia and key domestic, regional, and global partners. In its ability to build trust from the bottom up and side by side, the Australian army uniquely contributes to joint and whole-of-government international engagement efforts.⁶⁰ This would offer particular benefits to the special forces, whose own unique efforts would be greatly facilitated by a more favorable operating environment. Existing strategic engagement efforts do not extend far enough and are not structured to fulfill the aim of establishing enduring relational trust-based relationships across the region and abroad. Periodic ship visits, joint exercises, capacity-building, and cultural exchanges are important but insufficient to respond to the persistent challenges of the shifting operating environment. The augmentation of the Australian army's civil-military information center capability, potentially leveraging expanded reservist forces trained with a specific skill set, could provide the scale-appropriate niche capability for the army, whether acting independently or in an alliance contingency. Enabled by its strategic agility and innovation, the army's impact will be to leverage mass through enduring strategic effect in order to realize a truly *strategic army*.

Conclusion

Rapid shifts in the future operating environment present traditional Western armies with a number of strategic risks, including the speed and scope of change

in the human and technical environment, and the expression of these elements through the prism of increasingly diverse and unpredictable threats to the regional and global rules-based order. These threats have emerged from the technology-driven shift from vertical to horizontal digital information flows and the associated degree of hyper-connectivity. This results in an expanded battlefield, with an increasing emphasis on cognitive vulnerabilities that do not discern between military and civilian domains or conditions of peace and war. This gives rise to a high-tempo threat environment of constant, unrestricted, and unbounded warfare. Together, these shifts in the strategic landscape amount to what is essentially a cognitive contest, one that goes beyond existing risk modeling and challenges the army to account for broader types of threats. This challenge reveals the critical role played by trust in the constitution and understanding of the nature and character of threats and the required response. Trust can provide the "cognitive shield" in the changing operating environment.

The threat environment is forcing a reorientation on the army that is highly disruptive but also presents new opportunities. The necessary reorientation challenges the army to seriously consider its future roles and the structure and makeup of the key capabilities required to deliver the desired strategic engagement effects, integrated with close combat capabilities, in order to realize a *strategic army*. JFQ

Notes

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¹³ On the importance of narrative to strategic power, see Jill Lepore, “A New Americanism: Why a Nation Needs a National Story,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2019, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/unit-ed-states/2019-02-05/new-americanism-nationalism-jill-lepore>.

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