

Decision-Making in Defense Policy:
Institutions, Bias, and Strategic Accountability

By

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Abstract

Defense strategy has long depended not only on material capacity but also on the quality and integrity of decisions that guide its use. Throughout history, from the outbreak of the First World War to the nuclear standoff of 1962 and the global response to September 11, moments of crisis have shown that judgment under uncertainty determines both a nation's security and its moral legitimacy. This analysis examines defense decision-making as a multidimensional process shaped by cognitive bias, institutional structures, ethical reasoning, and historical context. It first outlines the conceptual foundations of decision-making in war, emphasizing uncertainty, civil-military dynamics, and moral restraint. It then identifies key drivers, such as political actors, intelligence systems, deliberative processes, and normative values, that have historically influenced strategic outcomes. The discussion turns to recurring challenges, including secrecy, exclusion of dissenting perspectives, short-term political calculations, and changing threat environments. Drawing from major historical case studies such as the First World War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and post-9/11 security policy, the analysis demonstrates how decision quality directly shapes operational success and public legitimacy. Building on these lessons, this analysis proposes pathways for stronger defense decision-making through behavioral insights, institutional reform, ethical accountability, and adaptive learning. This analysis concludes with implications for Agard Research Associates by advocating an interdisciplinary research approach that connects historical analysis with contemporary strategic reform. Ultimately, this analysis argues that the rigor, inclusivity, and ethical grounding of defense decision-making are as essential to national security as the weapons and technologies that implement it.

Keywords: defense decision making, strategic judgment, civil military relations, Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam War, War on Terror, historical policy analysis

Introduction

Throughout modern history, defense decision-making has served as a decisive determinant of national survival and legitimacy. The miscalculations that led to World War I illustrate how flawed assumptions and limited communication can transform political tensions into global conflicts. Likewise, during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the world teetered on the edge of nuclear war as policymakers balanced intelligence, uncertainty, and moral restraint. After September 11, 2001, the United States faced a new form of strategic ambiguity as it responded to terrorism with sweeping military and legal measures that reshaped global norms. Each of these events demonstrates that defense decisions carry consequences not only for national security but also for ethical credibility and institutional legitimacy. The ability to manage uncertainty, bias, and institutional complexity has repeatedly determined whether societies have avoided catastrophe or deepened it.¹ In this light, studying how leaders decide under pressure is as vital as studying the outcomes of their decisions.

Defense policy is often reduced to questions of technology or military capability; however, history shows that judgment under uncertainty defines its success. Decision-makers rely on mental shortcuts that help them simplify complexity but also produce systematic biases. Cognitive psychology identifies these as heuristics that can distort reasoning through overconfidence, anchoring, and availability effects.² In defense environments, these biases can lead to overestimation of capabilities or misjudgment of adversaries, resulting in costly strategic errors.³ Military professionals operating under time pressure often modify their cognitive processes to meet operational demands, which can amplify such errors.⁴ Overconfidence bias, in particular, leads experts to assume that experience equates to accuracy, thereby underestimating risk and dissenting analysis.⁵ Therefore, understanding how cognitive biases shape defense judgment provides a critical foundation for reforming strategic institutions and improving decision quality.

Institutional design and civil-military relations further shape defense decision outcomes. Civilian oversight ensures that armed forces remain subject to democratic authority, but it also introduces tensions between expertise and accountability. When civilian leaders defer excessively to military advice, oversight weakens; when they intrude too heavily, professional autonomy and morale suffer. Effective defense institutions require a balance grounded in mutual trust and shared purposes.⁶ Mukherjee and Pion-Berlin argue that defense ministries serve as the “fulcrum” of civilian

¹ Vincent Berthet, “The Impact of Cognitive Biases on Professionals’ Decision-Making: A Review of Four Occupational Areas,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2022): 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ Alexandru Bosânceanu, “Biases Influence on Military Decision Making,” *13th International Scientific Conference on Defense Resources Management in the 21st Century* (Braşov: Ministry of National Defense, 2018), 63–65.

⁴ Blair S. Williams, “Heuristics and Biases in Military Decision Making,” *Military Review* 90, no. 5 (2010): 42–44.

⁵ Bosânceanu, “Biases Influence on Military Decision Making,” pp. 56–58.

⁶ Kevin F. Krupski, “‘Who’s The Boss?’ Defining the Civil-Military Relationship in the Twenty-First Century,” *Military Review* 103, no. 1 (2023): 27–29.

control, mediating between political leadership and military execution to preserve legitimacy.⁷ However, information asymmetry between civilian policymakers and military professionals can lead to mistrust and policy failure, if not managed through structured communication and transparency.⁸ This dynamic underscores that defense decision-making is inseparable from the institutional relationships that govern it.

This analysis argues that defense decision-making must be understood as a multidimensional process shaped by uncertainty, cognitive limitations, institutional design, and ethical reasoning. It begins by outlining the conceptual foundations and explaining how uncertainty and organizational behavior influence strategic judgment. It then identifies the core drivers, actors, information systems, deliberative processes, and normative frameworks that direct defense choices. The following section addresses challenges, including cognitive bias, secrecy, exclusion of dissent, and short-term political pressure. Subsequently, this analysis explores pathways for improvement, emphasizing behavioral insights, institutional reform, and inclusive deliberation structures. The analysis then applies this framework to historical case studies: World War I, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and post-9/11 defense policy. Finally, it concludes with implications for *Agard Research Associates, Inc.*, highlighting how interdisciplinary and historically grounded inquiries can strengthen defense decision-making in modern contexts.

⁷ Anit Mukherjee and David Pion-Berlin, “The Fulcrum of Democratic Civilian Control: Re-imagining the Role of Defence Ministries,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, nos. 6–7 (2022): 783–785.

⁸ Krupski, “Who’s the Boss?” pp. 28–30.

Conceptual Foundations in Defense Policy

Defense policy rests on theoretical foundations that define how uncertainty, authority, and morality interact within strategic decision-making. Understanding these foundations requires examining the cognitive and institutional limits that constrain rational judgment in conditions of conflict. The works of Clausewitz, Huntington, and subsequent scholars illustrate that friction, civil–military relations, and ethical reasoning form the structural and moral core of defense thought. This section analyzes these conceptual elements to explain how enduring uncertainties shape both the practice and philosophy of defense decision-making.

Friction and Uncertainty

Defense decision-making has always occurred under conditions of uncertainty, limiting the precision of intelligence and the predictability of outcomes. Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* presents war as an inherently uncertain human activity governed by chance, emotion, and incomplete knowledge.⁹ His notion of "friction" captures the resistance arising from the interaction between human imperfection and the complexities of warfare. Barry Watts's *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War* reinforces that these impediments persist despite technological advances, demonstrating through modern examples such as the Gulf War that no system can eliminate friction altogether.¹⁰ Friction is not merely a technical problem but a structural feature of war that reflects the limits of military cognition and organization.

Clausewitz's concept of the "fog of war" is often misinterpreted as solely referring to a lack of information on the battlefield. In reality, it encompasses a broader range of uncertainties and frictions inherent in warfare, including human factors, chance events, and complex interactions between opposing forces. Eugenia Kiesling's analysis in "On War Without the Fog" challenges this common misinterpretation of Clausewitz's concept. Contrary to popular belief, Clausewitz did not employ the phrase "fog of war" to describe confusion on the battlefield. Instead, he viewed uncertainty as a fundamental aspect of warfare that tests combatants' moral and psychological resilience. This perspective shifts the understanding of uncertainty from a mere lack of information to a more complex element that impacts the human dimensions of conflict. Kiesling's interpretation suggests that Clausewitz saw uncertainty as an inherent and necessary component of war rather than a problem to be solved through improved intelligence or technology.¹¹ Collectively, these interpretations demonstrate that uncertainty remains inseparable from defense policy, as decision-

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), "Book One," 7.

¹⁰ Barry D. Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2004), 3–4.

¹¹ Eugenia C. Kiesling, "On War Without the Fog," *Military Review* (September–October 2001): 86–87.

makers continually attempt to act through the opacity created by limited intelligence and human fallibility.

Civil-Military Balance

While uncertainty defines the operational environment, the structure of civil–military relations determine how society responds to it. Samuel Huntington’s *The Soldier and the State* argues that the legitimacy and effectiveness of defense policy depend on balancing military professionalism with civilian control.¹² His model of “objective control” promotes military autonomy within a clearly defined civilian authority, ensuring that professional competence supports rather than threatens democracy. Kevin Krupski’s “Who’s the Boss? Defining the Civil-Military Relationship in the Twenty-First Century” revises this framework by distinguishing between principal–agent and principal–steward models. The principal–agent model, associated with Peter Feaver, portrays military officers as agents whose preferences may diverge from their civilian principals, necessitating constant monitoring to prevent shirking.¹³ Instead, Krupski argues for a stewardship approach in which military leaders internalize shared values with civilian authorities, aligning their motives toward collective goals through trust, collaboration, and transparency.¹⁴ This theory emphasizes that effective defense policies emerge not from control alone but from the mutual recognition of public service as a unifying purpose. By treating the military as a partner in governance rather than a subordinate contractor, stewardship theory restores harmony between expertise and accountability, both of which are essential for sound defense decision-making.

Institutional structures shape not only how authority is distributed but also how information and values circulate within bureaucracies. Huntington recognized that political and military actors often clash because of divergent organizational incentives and professional worldviews.¹⁵ Krupski extends this observation by showing how overlapping jurisdictions and fragmented hierarchies can create friction within government itself, producing policy incoherence even when intentions align.¹⁶ The bureaucratic dimension of defense decision-making thus mirrors Clausewitzian friction at the institutional level, where coordination failures and competing interests distort the strategic clarity. Clausewitz anticipated this structural limitation when he observed that even the most rational systems encounter resistance from chance, emotion, and complexity.¹⁷ Watts reinforces this insight, arguing that friction remains a universal constraint on military systems because human and organizational

¹² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 2–4.

¹³ Krupski, “Who’s the Boss?” pp. 28–29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

¹⁵ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 7–9.

¹⁶ Krupski, “Who’s the Boss?” pp. 28–29.

¹⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, “Book Two”, 2.

behavior introduce unpredictability into all forms of conflict, regardless of technological sophistication.¹⁸ The persistence of friction across centuries illustrates that decision quality depends less on eliminating uncertainty and more on managing it through institutional learning and moral discipline.

Moral and Cognitive Foundations

Ethical reasoning provides a second foundation for understanding defense decision-making beyond technical or organizational constraints. James Childress's "Just-War Theories" conceptualizes just war as a moral framework based on prima facie duties such as legitimate authority, just cause, right intention, proportionality, and last resort.¹⁹ These duties are intrinsically binding but can be overridden by higher moral necessity when survival or justice demands them. Therefore, the just-war framework connects ethical reasoning with political judgment, requiring leaders to justify the use of force not only strategically but also morally. Nobuo Hayashi's "On the Ethics of Nuclear Weapons" confronts the extreme test of these principles in the nuclear age. Hayashi explains that consequentialist arguments for deterrence rely on unverifiable counterfactuals about alternative histories and rival futures, which makes them morally inconclusive.²⁰ Because nuclear weapons inflict indiscriminate suffering, their use cannot satisfy proportionality or discrimination, rendering them intrinsically immoral, regardless of the purpose.²¹ Michael Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars* similarly argues that some acts, such as the deliberate targeting of civilians, remain morally forbidden even when pursued for legitimate ends.²² Thus, ethical analysis functions as both restraint and guidance, preserving legitimacy in decisions that could otherwise be reduced to expedient calculations of power.

The moral and institutional dimensions of defense policy converge in the cognitive realm, where decisions are made. Clausewitz located friction within the human mind as much as within the battlefield, noting that fear, fatigue, and imperfect judgment compound the difficulty of command.²³ Kiesling's interpretation reinforces the idea that Clausewitz viewed friction primarily as a moral challenge that tests character, rather than as a purely logistical problem.²⁴ Watts extends this view by

¹⁸ Barry D. Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, 1–3.

¹⁹ James F. Childress, "Just-War Theories: The Bases, Interrelations, Priorities, and Functions of Their Criteria," *Theological Studies* 39, no. 1 (1978): 20–22.

²⁰ Nobuo Hayashi, *On the Ethics of Nuclear Weapons: Framing a Political Consensus on the Unacceptability of Nuclear Weapons* (ILPI–UNIDIR NPT Review Conference Series #NPT2015, 2015), 2–3.

²¹ Nobuo Hayashi, *On the Ethics of Nuclear Weapons*, 3–4.

²² Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 129–131.

²³ Clausewitz, *On War*, "Book One," 7.

²⁴ Kiesling, "On War Without the Fog," p. 87.

describing friction as a structural constant that no technological advancement can fully remove because it originates from human and systemic limitations.²⁵ This convergence of uncertainty, institutional complexity, and ethical tension defines the environment in which defense leaders must operate. Decisions made under such conditions are rarely optimal; they are moral judgments under constraint, informed by experience and responsibility. The Clausewitzian understanding of friction therefore remains relevant not only as a theory of combat but also as a philosophy of governance, reminding policymakers that clarity and control in defense affairs are always partial achievements.

The conceptual foundations of defense policy reveal that uncertainty, authority, and morality are interdependent forces that shape strategic judgment. Friction persists across cognitive, institutional, and ethical domains, reminding policymakers that decision-making is never free from human or structural limits. Effective defense governance depends on balancing expertise with accountability while preserving moral legitimacy under uncertainty. These foundations establish a theoretical basis upon which practical drivers and challenges of defense decision-making can be understood.

²⁵ Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, 5–6.

Core Drivers of Defense Policy Decisions

Historically, defense decision-making has depended on the interaction of political, military, and institutional forces that determine how information, strategy, and values are translated into policy. Across different periods, recurring drivers such as leadership behavior, intelligence performance, and deliberative structures have shaped national outcomes during war and crisis. The interplay of these factors reveals that the quality of defense policy is not solely a function of resources but also of how decision-makers integrate judgment, evidence, and authority. This section examines these historical drivers through four primary dimensions: actors and stakeholders, information and intelligence, processes of deliberation, and values and norms.

Actors and Stakeholders

Political executives have consistently played a central role in shaping defense policy outcomes through their control over strategy and interpretation of advice from military and civilian institutions. As Feaver and Kohn explain, civilian leaders occupy the highest authority in defense decision-making; however, their effectiveness depends on how well they manage relationships with professional military counterparts.²⁶ Presidents such as Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson each faced this civil-military tension in distinct ways. Wilson's insistence on centralized presidential control during World War I limited Allied autonomy, whereas Roosevelt balanced personal diplomacy with reliance on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Kennedy and Johnson inherited institutionalized advisory systems but struggled to ensure dissenting views were adequately represented. According to Feaver and Kohn, successful civil-military relations require a mutual understanding of distinct responsibilities, where civilian authority defines policy, and military leaders provide expertise within constitutional limits.²⁷

Military leadership has served as both a stabilizing and complicating force in defense policymaking. During World War I, Allied war councils often demonstrated friction between political objectives and military planning. Civilian leaders sought unity of command, while generals defended operational independence, revealing early examples of inter-Allied coordination difficulties that persisted in later coalitions. The Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam War, as later documented in Ondrěk's analysis of Operation Rolling Thunder, also struggled to reconcile divergent service perspectives under political supervision.²⁸ Johnson's management style emphasized control and consensus but inadvertently suppressed open debate. His senior advisers often aligned their positions

²⁶ Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, "Civil–Military Relations in the United States: What Senior Leaders Need to Know (and Usually Don't)," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (2021): 13.

²⁷ Feaver and Kohn, "Civil–Military Relations in the United States," p. 16.

²⁸ József Ondrěk, "Johnson and Vietnam: Decision Making during Operation Rolling Thunder," *AARMS* 21, no. 2 (2022): 90.

with the president's expectations rather than risk a confrontation. This pattern of constrained dialogue illustrates how institutional hierarchies can narrow policy options, even in participatory systems of governance.

Within these dynamics, intelligence and advisory institutions, such as the Central Intelligence Agency, evolved into influential stakeholders in Cold War defense policy. By the 1960s, the CIA's assessments shaped both the threat perception and justification for escalation in Vietnam. Zarate's study of Johnson's administration shows that intelligence briefings were regularly used to support pre-existing policy preferences, confirming, rather than challenging, the president's assumptions about containment and credibility.²⁹ The CIA's growing role within the National Security Council reflected the shift toward bureaucratic decision-making, where agencies competed for influence rather than balanced strategic deliberation. This institutional rivalry mirrored earlier tensions between Allied and national commands during World War I, suggesting that defense policy outcomes often depend less on single decisions than on the distribution of authority among competing actors within the military.

Information and Intelligence

Failures and distortions in intelligence have repeatedly altered the course of defense policy. The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 remains a defining example of how intelligence warnings can fail despite abundant data. Dahl's reassessment of the event demonstrates that while signals of Japanese hostility were available, the problem was not collection but the inability of decision-makers to recognize and act on the intelligence they had received.³⁰ His analysis challenges the conventional belief that analysts simply missed the warning signs, showing instead that the commanders in Hawaii lacked precise tactical information and were unreceptive to uncertain warnings. This gap between intelligence output and command receptivity marked the first in a series of modern failures in the American strategic warning.

Cadbury's complementary study adds a psychological dimension to the Pearl Harbor case, identifying denial as a critical explanatory factor in command failure.³¹ He argues that Admiral Kimmel and General Short possessed enough information to anticipate a Japanese carrier attack, but chose to interpret evidence through the lens of improbability, focusing on sabotage threats rather than air assault. The result was a failure to activate the radar defense systems and an underestimation of adversary intent. Cadbury's emphasis on cognitive bias highlights how psychological denial among senior officers can produce disasters, even when institutional structures function as intended.

²⁹ Arturo T. Zarate, *The Vietnam Escalation: Decision Making in the Johnson Administration* (Edinburg: University of Texas, 1988), 47.

³⁰ Erik J. Dahl, "Reassessing the Intelligence Failure at Pearl Harbor," *Naval Postgraduate School/SSRN Working Paper* (2011), 3.

³¹ Matthew J. Cadbury, "Pearl Harbor: Intelligence, Psychology and Command Failure," *Journal of Intelligence and Terrorism Studies* 2 (2017): 2.

Together, Dahl and Cadbury show that the Pearl Harbor case was not simply a technical lapse but an interaction of human judgment, organizational limits, and cultural assumptions.

The Vietnam War reproduced the same intelligence challenges in a new geopolitical context. As Blum and Pate-Cornell demonstrate through their probabilistic model of national security crises, policymakers often face ambiguous signals in high-uncertainty environments and must decide whether to act on incomplete warnings.³² Their findings illustrate how intelligence filtering depends on both technical probability and political risk tolerance. During the Vietnam escalation, Johnson's administration repeatedly discounted intelligence that contradicted the optimistic assessments of progress. Zarate's account notes that Johnson's inner circle favored data supporting continued commitment, reinforcing political rather than strategic reasoning.³³ The interaction between intelligence agencies and the executive thus became one of confirmation rather than correction, reducing the value of intelligence as an independent check on decision bias.

Processes of Deliberation

Defense policymaking during wartime often depends on the structure and inclusivity of the deliberative processes. Lyndon Johnson's Tuesday Lunch meetings provide a revealing case of concentrated presidential control. As Humphrey documents, these sessions replaced formal National Security Council meetings and became the central forum for Vietnam War decisions.³⁴ The informality of the meetings allowed for rapid discussion but limited the diversity of perspectives on the topic. Attendance was restricted to a small group of loyal advisers, including Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, National Security Adviser Bundy, and later, Director of Central Intelligence Helms. According to Barrett, the appeal of the Tuesday Lunch format lay in Johnson's desire for secrecy and efficiency, yet this structure also insulated him from dissent and critical review.³⁵ By centralizing discussions, Johnson effectively merged advisory and executive roles, narrowing the policy process to a circle of ideological and personal trust.

Ondrěk's research on Operation Rolling Thunder further illustrates how this decision structure affected operational outcomes. He noted that Johnson's reliance on a small advisory group led to repeated compromises between military feasibility and political caution.³⁶ The president sought proportional escalation that avoided Chinese or Soviet intervention, a strategy that frustrated

³² David M. Blum and M. Elisabeth Pate-Cornell, "Probabilistic Warnings in National Security Crises: Pearl Harbor Revisited," *arXiv preprint* (2018), 7.

³³ Zarate, *The Vietnam Escalation*, 55.

³⁴ David C. Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House: A Preliminary Assessment," *Diplomatic History* 8, no. 1 (1984): 81.

³⁵ David M. Barrett, "Doing 'Tuesday Lunch' at Lyndon Johnson's White House: New Archival Evidence on Vietnam Decision Making," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24, no. 4 (1991): 677.

³⁶ Ondrěk, "Johnson and Vietnam," p. 92.

commanders with restrictions and unclear objectives. This pattern of “measured response,” intended to preserve political flexibility, produced prolonged campaigns without a decisive effect. The Rolling Thunder case exemplifies how deliberative structures that prioritize political control can undermine the coherence between objectives and military execution.

Kennedy's ExComm during the Cuban Missile Crisis exemplified the advantages of incorporating diverse perspectives in high-stakes decision-making. The committee's structured approach allowed for a thorough examination of multiple viewpoints, fostering a more comprehensive analysis of the situation. This historical example highlights the critical role of inclusive advisory systems in generating well-informed and nuanced policy decisions, particularly during times of international crisis. In Johnson's case, as Barrett and Humphrey both confirm, the emphasis on loyalty over candor contributed to groupthink and the marginalization of dissenting analysis.³⁷ The exclusion of lower-level experts and external critics meant that policy decisions lacked rigorous challenges, reinforcing the cognitive and institutional biases already present in the intelligence process.

Values and Norms

Defense decision-making is also shaped by evolving ethical and legal norms that constrain or legitimize forceful action. In the aftermath of Vietnam, public protests and congressional debates produced the War Powers Resolution of 1973, which sought to reassert legislative oversight over presidential military actions. Crook's analysis of the Resolution describes it as both a constitutional reaffirmation and a practical failure, noting that while it codified procedural checks, it rarely altered executive behavior.³⁸ The legislation emerged from growing disillusionment with unilateral presidential authority, particularly after revelations about the secret bombing of Cambodia. Despite its limitations, the War Powers Resolution symbolized a societal shift toward accountability and democratization of defense policy.

Normative concerns also influenced the U.S. nuclear strategy during the Cold War. Tannenwald's study of the Vietnam War reveals that the so-called “nuclear taboo” constrained policymakers from considering atomic options despite military feasibility.³⁹ She argues that moral and reputational factors create a powerful normative barrier against nuclear escalation, demonstrating how ethical beliefs can shape strategic outcomes even in crises. This moral restraint was reinforced by fears of public backlash and a desire to maintain international legitimacy. Thus, the Cold War produced a dual framework in defense policy: one grounded in realpolitik deterrence and the other in the ethical preservation of human limits.

³⁷ Barrett, “Doing ‘Tuesday Lunch,’” p. 678; Humphrey, “Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House,” p. 84.

³⁸ John R. Crook, “The War Powers Resolution: A Dim and Fading Legacy,” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 44, no. 2 (2012): 411.

³⁹ Nina Tannenwald, “Nuclear Weapons and the Vietnam War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 4 (2006): 678.

These normative dimensions interact with institutional and political structures to influence long-term legitimacy. The post-Vietnam reforms of civil-military relations, reflected in Feaver and Kohn's discussion of modern leadership expectations, emphasized ethical professionalism within military service as essential to constitutional democracy.⁴⁰ This emphasis on lawful obedience, ethical reasoning, and civilian oversight continues to serve as the foundation for the legitimacy of defense policy. Values and norms are therefore integral to decision-making, ensuring that the pursuit of security remains aligned with democratic accountability.

Across these cases, the recurring drivers of defense policy, leadership behavior, intelligence interpretation, institutional structure, and normative belief have determined not only strategic success but also the legitimacy of national security actions. Political executives shape decisions through their management of advisory networks and their capacity to balance control and inclusion. Intelligence failures, whether at Pearl Harbor or in Vietnam, reveal the persistent human and institutional limits of foresight. Deliberative processes, such as Johnson's Tuesday Lunches, show how narrow consultations can amplify bias and reduce adaptability. Finally, evolving norms, from the War Powers Resolution to nuclear restraint, demonstrate that defense policy is inseparable from the ethical and political values of its time. Together, these patterns highlight that defense decision-making is both a technical and moral enterprise, where errors in the process can have consequences as profound as failures on the battlefield. The following section explores how these challenges recur across eras and identifies the structural obstacles that continue to undermine effective decision-making in defense policy.

⁴⁰ Feaver and Kohn, "Civil-Military Relations in the United States," p. 18.

Challenges in Defense Decision-Making

In the past, defense decision-making was shaped by human and institutional limitations as a result of external threats. Crises often expose flaws in judgment, secrecy, and accountability that undermine national strategy, even when intentions are sound. This section examines the major challenges that have historically constrained effective defense policy, focusing on the recurring problems of cognition, exclusion, secrecy, and short-termism. These pitfalls reveal that the quality of defense choices depends not only on the availability of information but also on how leaders interpret, debate, and act on it under pressure. From the groupthink of Vietnam to the secrecy of Cold War nuclear planning, defense failures frequently stem from systemic tendencies rather than isolated mistakes. Understanding these enduring weaknesses provides insight into why even advanced institutions struggle to balance strategic foresight with ethical and democratic responsibility.

Cognitive Bias in Crises

Defense policymaking often falters when cognitive biases distort risk and opportunity interpretations. Irving Janis first identified this phenomenon as “groupthink,” describing how cohesive policy groups develop an excessive desire for unanimity that suppress dissent and distort reality. During the Vietnam escalation, high-level officials, including President Johnson’s closest advisers, demonstrated many of the same symptoms outlined by Janis: self-censorship, illusions of invulnerability, and moral certainty about their cause.⁴¹ Paul ‘t Hart later expanded on Janis’s theory, emphasizing that groupthink thrives in hierarchical political settings where loyalty is valued above deliberation.⁴² In such environments, group members avoid confronting superiors, creating a narrow feedback loop that reinforces flawed assumptions about policy feasibility. The Vietnam War decision-making process exemplifies this pattern, as the executive inner circle consistently resisted contradictory intelligence that could undermine their consensus. These dynamics reflect not only psychological errors, but also structural flaws in decision-making institutions, where cohesion substitutes for evidence-based reasoning.⁴³

While Janis’s original model emphasized the social dynamics of policymaking groups, later analyses showed that these cognitive failures were reinforced by political pressure. Roderick Kramer’s reinterpretation of groupthink demonstrated that President Johnson and his advisers were guided as much by the fear of domestic political loss as by strategic reasoning.⁴⁴ Such pressure

⁴¹ Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 13–16.

⁴² Paul ‘t Hart, *Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 139–142.

⁴³ Roderick M. Kramer, “Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam Decisions 25 Years Later,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 73, nos. 2–3 (1998): 237–239.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 240–242.

produced overconfidence in the administration's ability to manage escalation, even as the intelligence community raised serious doubts about the direction of the conflict. Overconfidence was not unique to Vietnam; earlier European decision-makers exhibited similar biases before World War I, when rapid mobilization plans and nationalist zeal replaced sober assessments of risk.⁴⁵ In both cases, leaders underestimated the scale of the crisis because their institutions rewarded assertive decision-making and punished hesitancy. The result was a recurring pattern in which policymakers failed to anticipate the long-term costs of short-term tactical choices. Thus, cognitive bias in crises reveals a deep vulnerability in defense policymaking, where perception and psychology can prove as decisive as any weapon system or military doctrine.

Exclusion of Perspectives

The suppression of dissent has historically weakened defense decision-making by reducing leaders' access to diverse information. During the Vietnam War, President Johnson's "Tuesday Lunch" meetings epitomized this exclusionary dynamic. As Humphrey's analysis of these sessions demonstrates, the president preferred intimate gatherings of a few trusted advisers who shared similar assumptions about the war's progress and political necessity.⁴⁶ These meetings were intended to ensure efficiency, but instead insulated Johnson from contrary advice, narrowing the range of strategic alternatives considered. By the mid-1960s, the absence of critical debate allowed the escalation of a war that many military and intelligence officials privately doubted could be won in the first place. This structure mirrored Janis's concept of "mindguards," actors who shield leaders from dissenting information to maintain consensus.⁴⁷ When dissenting views are systematically excluded, group cohesion replaces analytical rigor as the guiding principle of decision-making.

The dangers of excluding perspectives were also evident in earlier Cold War contexts. During the McCarthy era, political fear and ideological rigidity discouraged officials from challenging the dominant narratives about security and loyalty. Scholars examining bureaucratic behavior observe that the suppression of internal criticism leads to a phenomenon described by Paul 't Hart, wherein rational individuals collectively support irrational policies due to the association of dissent with disloyalty.⁴⁸ In Vietnam's case, this was reinforced by the executive's desire to avoid public controversy, leading to decision-making within a closed cognitive environment. Robert McNamara's managerial approach emphasized consensus over confrontation, creating a bureaucracy that rewarded agreement with presidential priorities rather than independent evaluation. As Kramer observed, many participants later acknowledged that their silence stemmed from political calculation rather than

⁴⁵ Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London: Ashfield Press, 1989), 45–47.

⁴⁶ Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House," pp. 82–84.

⁴⁷ Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 18.

⁴⁸ Hart, *Groupthink in Government*, 3–5.

genuine conviction.⁴⁹ The exclusion of perspectives thus transformed democratic institutions into echo chambers, where the appearance of unity masked the erosion of strategic insights.

Institutional Secrecy

Secrecy has long served as both a shield and liability in defense policy. During the Cold War, the secrecy surrounding nuclear planning was often justified as a means of maintaining deterrence, but it also hindered democratic oversight and ethical accountability. John Lewis Gaddis notes that much of the superpower competition was conducted under an “ever-present anxiety” that miscalculation could trigger catastrophe, yet governments continued to restrict information from legislatures and citizens alike.⁵⁰ Such opacity allows executive actors to make unilateral decisions about weapons deployment and targeting without meaningful scrutiny. In practice, secrecy became a self-perpetuating system, where the need to maintain advantage justified the concealment of actions that could provoke crisis escalation. The classified nature of strategic planning meant that even senior officials often lacked a comprehensive understanding of nuclear policy, fostering mistrust within and between institutions. As Nina Tannenwald argues, this secrecy also limited the moral debate about the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence, delaying the emergence of what she calls the “nuclear taboo” against first use.⁵¹

The Vietnam War illustrates how secrecy undermines informed policymaking. The 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which alleged attacks on U.S. destroyers justified congressional authorization for war, was later revealed to be based on misinterpreted radar data and incomplete intelligence reports. Robert Hanyok’s archival research shows that naval communications were selectively interpreted to support escalation, while contradictory evidence was suppressed or ignored.⁵² This manipulation of information allowed the executive branch to present a false narrative of aggression to Congress and the public, effectively circumventing the constitutional checks on the use of force. The secrecy surrounding the incident reflected a deeper institutional habit: decisions made in crisis were protected by classification and speed, leaving little opportunity for verification. As Gaddis and others emphasize, this pattern mirrored Cold War tendencies to prioritize control over transparency, reinforcing a culture in which information asymmetry became a strategic weapon.⁵³ Institutional secrecy thus perpetuated flawed assumptions and hindered the corrective function that open deliberation is meant to provide in democratic governance.

⁴⁹ Kramer, “Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam Decisions,” pp. 238–240.

⁵⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 5–8.

⁵¹ Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 70–73.

⁵² Robert J. Hanyok, “The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2–4 August 1964,” *Cryptologic Quarterly* (National Security Agency, 2000), 5–7.

⁵³ Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, 48–50.

Short-Termism

Short-term political considerations have repeatedly undermined the long-term effectiveness of defense strategies. The interwar democracies of Europe, preoccupied with economic depression and political instability, underestimated Adolf Hitler's ambitions because rearmament was seen as domestically unpopular and fiscally irresponsible. As Michael Howard explains, Britain's prewar defense debates reflected a tension between strategic necessity and political expediency, resulting in delayed mobilization and incomplete military preparedness.⁵⁴ This form of short-termism, which prioritizes immediate political stability over long-term security, illustrates how democratic institutions can become risk-averse in the face of domestic constraints. The failure to anticipate the magnitude of German aggression demonstrates the cost of treating defense policy as a secondary issue until the crisis becomes unavoidable. Such episodes highlight that the quality of defense decision-making often depends not only on information but also on the political willingness to act upon it.

The same problem resurfaced in the Vietnam era, when President Johnson escalated the war partly to protect his domestic "Great Society" agenda from accusations of weakness. As Humphrey's study of the Tuesday Lunch meetings shows, Johnson's foreign policy decisions were inseparable from his calculations about congressional elections and public approval.⁵⁵ His advisers often deferred to these political imperatives rather than strategic assessments, producing what Roderick Kramer described as "political psychological" rather than purely military errors.⁵⁶ Short-termism took the form of managing image and reputation at the expense of policy coherence. This dynamic aligns with Hart's observation that democratic leaders face structural incentives to favor immediate results that can be communicated to voters even when those decisions generate strategic vulnerabilities.⁵⁷ In both the 1930s and the 1960s, leaders' focus on political optics curtailed the critical reflection necessary for a sound defense strategy. Therefore, short-termism represents not simply a lapse in planning but a structural flaw in how political systems reward action over prudence.

Evolving Threats

As threats evolve, decision-making structures often struggle to adapt, revealing tensions between past doctrines and new realities. The transition from conventional warfare to nuclear deterrence after World War II transformed the moral and strategic calculus of defense policies. Nina

⁵⁴ Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment*, 66–69.

⁵⁵ David C. Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House," 85–87.

⁵⁶ Roderick M. Kramer, "Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam Decisions," 237.

⁵⁷ Paul 't Hart, *Groupthink in Government*, 183–186.

Tannenwald argues that the advent of nuclear weapons created an unprecedented ethical dilemma, forcing leaders to reconcile deterrence theory with the catastrophic humanitarian implications of use.⁵⁸ However, early Cold War decision-making remained heavily influenced by pre-nuclear military paradigms, emphasizing deterrence through strength rather than restraint. John Lewis Gaddis observed that leaders like Truman and Eisenhower operated in an environment where secrecy and uncertainty bred both fear and overconfidence, resulting in policies that balanced precariously between brinkmanship and caution.⁵⁹ The institutional frameworks designed for conventional warfare proved ill-suited for managing the psychological and ethical dimensions of nuclear deterrence, exposing a lag between technological innovation and strategic adaptation.

A similar pattern appeared in the Vietnam War, where the United States faced an unconventional insurgency rather than a traditional state conflict. Jeffrey Race's field research in *War Comes to Long An* revealed that American and South Vietnamese forces consistently misjudged the nature of the conflict, applying conventional military logic to a fundamentally political and social struggle.⁶⁰ This mismatch between doctrine and reality led to escalating violence without strategic clarity, demonstrating how institutions anchored in previous eras of warfare failed to recognize the adaptive nature of their adversaries. As Race concluded, the persistence of bureaucratic and doctrinal inertia prevented innovation in both tactics and policy formulation in the US military. These failures underscore a broader historical lesson: defense decision-making must evolve with the threat environment, or risk perpetuating obsolete strategies. From the nuclear standoff of the Cold War to the guerrilla conflicts of Southeast Asia, the inability to adapt to evolving threats has consistently undermined both operational effectiveness and moral legitimacy in defense policy.

⁵⁸ Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo*, 43–45.

⁵⁹ Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, 119–122.

⁶⁰ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 102–104.

Pathways to Stronger Defense Decision-Making

The history of defense strategy reveals that decision-making effectiveness depends on the ability of institutions to adapt, integrate lessons, and remain accountable to ethical and political principles. Wars and crises have repeatedly shown that even powerful nations can falter when they fail to institutionalize learning, coordination, and moral reflection. This section examines how structured reforms and behavioral mechanisms have historically strengthened defense decision-making. Through the integration of red-teaming and wargaming, institutional redesign, inclusivity in strategic planning, ethical oversight, and adaptive learning, defense systems have evolved to meet complex and changing threats. The following analysis explores these pathways through historical examples and scholarly research, demonstrating that reforming how states decide on matters of war and security is as crucial as technological or military advancement.⁶¹

Behavioral Tools

Behavioral mechanisms such as wargaming and red-teaming have long provided frameworks for anticipating risk and improving decision-making under uncertainty. During the interwar period, the United States Navy developed Fleet Problems that allowed officers to test strategic concepts against potential adversaries in the Pacific. Edward S. Miller's study of War Plan Orange demonstrates that these exercises encouraged critical debate and long-term preparation, giving the Navy strategic foresight before the outbreak of World War II.⁶² Trent Hone expands upon this history by showing that the Navy used feedback from these exercises to refine doctrine, enabling officers to challenge prevailing assumptions and improve fleet performance.⁶³ These simulations created an institutional habit of experimentation, transforming military planning into a learning process that is grounded in data and reflection. The success of U.S. naval operations in the Pacific was not the result of improvisation but of years of behavioral training that connected theory with practice.⁶⁴

Peter Perla's theory of the Cycle of Research and Learning provides a conceptual basis for understanding how such exercises bridge analysis and education. He argues that wargaming, exercises, and historical studies create a feedback loop that refines judgment by exposing decision-makers to realistic scenarios where uncertainty and consequence are intertwined.⁶⁵ Through this

⁶¹ Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 3–5.

⁶² Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 29–31.

⁶³ Trent Hone, *Learning War: The Evolution of Fighting Doctrine in the U.S. Navy, 1898–1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 23–26.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 172–175.

⁶⁵ Peter P. Perla, “Wargaming and the Cycle of Research and Learning,” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 5, no. 1 (2022): 198–200.

cycle, wargames move beyond abstract models and engage human reasoning directly, allowing participants to experience the outcomes of their choices and adapt in real-time. This approach was integral to the professionalization of military education and continues to shape how defense institutions train leaders to think critically about conflicts. By emphasizing human decision-making rather than predictive accuracy, wargaming cultivates flexibility and self-awareness, qualities vital to strategic leadership. It also provides a safe environment to identify and mitigate cognitive biases before they affect real-world decisions.⁶⁶

The Cold War period extended these behavioral tools through red teaming, which sought to identify vulnerabilities within complex systems by introducing adversarial perspectives. RAND's study on red teaming highlights that this approach, originally developed to simulate Soviet tactics, became a method for challenging institutional orthodoxy and revealing blind spots in risk assessments.⁶⁷ Red teaming creates a structured forum for dissent, allowing alternative viewpoints to test the resilience of dominant assumptions. Its value lies in uncovering what decision-makers fail to consider, which is an essential function in environments characterized by ambiguity and high stakes. Together, wargaming and red teaming form the behavioral foundation of adaptive decision-making, institutionalizing the habit of critical reflection that transforms knowledge into strategy.

Institutional Reforms

Institutional design determines the effectiveness of information and authority circulation within the defense system. The National Security Act of 1947 was a landmark reform intended to coordinate military, intelligence, and policy functions under a unified leadership. Amy Zegart's *Flawed by Design* reveals that this act, while visionary, created organizations constrained by political compromise and interservice rivalry.⁶⁸ The formation of the Department of Defense, Central Intelligence Agency, and National Security Council reflected competing interests rather than cohesive strategic planning. Zegart explains that these agencies inherited structural weaknesses that limited accountability and inhibited effective coordination between civilian policymakers and military leaders.⁶⁹ This fragmented design hinders information flow and fosters bureaucratic silos that would persist into the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the act institutionalized a permanent security apparatus, ensuring that national defense remained a central, organized function of government policy.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 204–206.

⁶⁷ Marie-Laure Hicks et al., *Exploring Red Teaming to Identify New and Emerging Risks from AI Foundation Models* (RAND Corporation, 2023), 1–3.

⁶⁸ Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 8–10.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 76–78.

The same structural problems resurfaced decades later in intelligence failures leading to the September 11 attacks. In her article “September 11 and the Adaptation Failure of U.S. Intelligence Agencies,” Zegart argues that Cold War institutions, designed for hierarchical command, struggled to respond to decentralized terrorist networks.⁷⁰ Bureaucratic fragmentation prevents agencies from sharing critical information, and entrenched cultures discourage collaboration. The absence of adaptive mechanisms within the intelligence community reveals the long-term costs of a rigid institutional design. After 9/11, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the reorganization of intelligence oversight represented attempts to correct systemic flaws. However, as Zegart notes, reforming organizational behavior requires more than structural change; it demands cultural transformation and continuous learning.⁷¹ The persistence of these challenges underscores the enduring tension between centralization for control and decentralization for adaptability in the governance of the defense sector.

The Department of Homeland Security’s progress report on implementing the 9/11 Commission’s recommendations illustrates both the achievements and limitations of this reform process. While the report identifies improvements in information sharing, border security, and emergency response, it also acknowledges the persistent issues of jurisdictional overlap and fragmented accountability.⁷² Thus, institutional reform remains an evolving endeavor, shaped by the interplay between policy intent and bureaucratic inertia. Effective decision-making requires mechanisms that not only integrate agencies but also encourage critical reviews and learning from failures. The lessons of 1947 and 2001 converge on a single point: defense organizations must be designed as adaptive systems capable of continuous self-correction. Without this, structural reforms risk replicating the inefficiencies that they aim to resolve.⁷³ The historical pattern demonstrates that institutional architecture and organizational culture must evolve together to sustain effective national-security decision-making.

Inclusive Mechanisms

Coalition command and alliance consultation are critical pathways for improving defense decision-making through inclusivity and shared accountability. During World War II, Allied coordination depended on the integration of diverse national military doctrines and political objectives. A. J. Rice explains that the success of Allied command structures lay in their ability to foster mutual confidence and cooperative decision-making rather than impose rigid hierarchies.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Amy B. Zegart, “September 11 and the Adaptation Failure of U.S. Intelligence Agencies,” *International Security* 29, no. 4 (2005): 80–83.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 108–110.

⁷² Department of Homeland Security, *Implementing 9/11 Commission Recommendations: Progress Report 2011* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), 4–8.

⁷³ Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 221–223.

⁷⁴ A. J. Rice, “Command and Control: The Essence of Coalition Warfare,” *Parameters* 27, no. 1 (1997): 12–14.

This shared authority balanced national interests and collective strategies, creating operational unity that enhanced both efficiency and legitimacy. Through mechanisms such as the Combined Chiefs of Staff, leaders from the United States and Britain institutionalized regular consultation and strategic transparency. The inclusivity of these arrangements allowed for the synchronization of military operations across multiple theaters and reduced the duplication of effort, establishing a model that was later emulated in international alliances.⁷⁵

The importance of inclusive mechanisms persisted through the Cold War in NATO's formation and functioning. Jeffrey Michaels explains that the alliance's nuclear use procedures relied on consensus among member states, preventing unilateral escalation and reinforcing the principle of collective responsibility.⁷⁶ The requirement for a multilateral agreement on nuclear deployment served as both a stabilizing and legitimizing feature of the NATO strategy. This framework integrated the moral dimension of deterrence by ensuring that no single state could independently initiate a nuclear conflict. Such inclusivity transformed NATO decision-making into a process of consultation that balanced deterrence and restraint. Michaels argues that the structure of NATO's strategic councils institutionalized deliberation as a safeguard against impulsive or politically motivated actions.⁷⁷

Leopoldo Nuti's study of NATO's role in non-proliferation and arms control further underscores how inclusivity links operational planning with diplomacy. Nuti describes how NATO policy integrated strategic defense with international law, supporting global non-proliferation norms while maintaining credible deterrence.⁷⁸ This blending of political consultation and legal compliance has created a durable framework for alliance legitimacy. The presence of consultative mechanisms reduces the risk of misinterpretation and ensures that member nations share ownership of high-stakes decisions. By embedding inclusive processes within its institutions, NATO turned collective security from a strategic necessity into a moral and procedural standard. The continuity from World War II coalition command to Cold War alliance management demonstrates that inclusivity in defense policy is not only a tool for cooperation but also a source of enduring legitimacy.⁷⁹

Ethical and Legal Frameworks

Ethical and legal accountability are essential for ensuring that defense decisions align with democratic and humanitarian principles. The Vietnam War era revealed how moral dissent and legal

⁷⁵ Rice, "Command and Control," pp. 15–17.

⁷⁶ Jeffrey H. Michaels. "'No Annihilation without Representation': NATO Nuclear Use Decision-Making during the Cold War." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46 (5): 1011–1016.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1017-1021.

⁷⁸ Leopoldo Nuti, *NATO's Role in Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Arms Control: A Critical History* (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2021), 5–8.

⁷⁹ Leopoldo Nuti, *NATO's Role in Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Arms Control*, 9–10.

reform reshaped civil-military relations and executive authority. The widespread protests against the escalation reflected a growing public demand for ethical oversight and political justification in warfare. Michael Walzer explains that this period marked a revival of “just war” theory, emphasizing proportionality, discrimination, and the moral responsibility of leaders to justify the use of force.⁸⁰ These moral challenges culminated in the War Powers Resolution of 1973, which reasserted congressional control over military deployment. Walzer noted that such reforms reintroduced ethical reasoning into national security debates, ensuring that questions of justice, legitimacy, and necessity accompanied strategic deliberation.⁸¹

The integration of international law into defense policy during the Cold War similarly reinforced global moral accountability. The International Court of Justice’s 1996 advisory opinion on the *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons* established that the use or threat of nuclear force must comply with humanitarian law and the principles of necessity and proportionality.⁸² This legal reasoning imposes constraints on nuclear deterrence, requiring states to reconcile their strategic objectives with humanitarian obligations. By formalizing these principles, international law institutionalizes ethical reflection as a component of defense decision-making. The ICJ’s opinion also underscored that the legality of deterrence depends on maintaining a credible commitment to disarmament, linking strategic restraint to international legitimacy.⁸³

Nina Tannenwald’s analysis of the “nuclear taboo” complements this legal perspective by describing how moral norms can influence state behavior even without formal enforcement mechanisms. She argued that the taboo against nuclear use emerged from decades of ethical discourse and public pressure, gradually transforming nuclear restraint into a normative principle within international politics.⁸⁴ This moral consensus shapes decision-making by stigmatizing the use of nuclear weapons as fundamentally illegitimate. Tannenwald’s findings suggest that ethical norms can exert as much influence on policy as material deterrence, guiding state behavior through reputation and legitimacy rather than through coercion. Together, Walzer, Tannenwald, and the ICJ show that ethics and law are not constraints external to strategy but are intrinsic elements of responsible defense governance. They ensure that the pursuit of national security remains consistent with preserving human dignity and international order.

⁸⁰ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015), xiii–xv.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44–47.

⁸² International Court of Justice, “Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *Advisory Opinion* (July 8, 1996), 2–3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁸⁴ Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo,” pp. 433–435.

Adaptive Learning

The final pathway to stronger defense decision-making lies in institutionalized learning. History shows that organizations capable of continuous feedback and self-assessment adapt more effectively to complex threats. During World War II, the U.S. The Navy established a culture of reflection through after-action reviews, tactical experimentation, and doctrine revision. Trent Hone shows that these learning processes were central to naval effectiveness, creating a system in which mistakes were studied systematically and translated into innovation.⁸⁵ Edward S. Miller similarly notes that prewar planning debates within the Navy, exemplified by the development of War Plan Orange, fostered intellectual flexibility that allowed officers to anticipate diverse scenarios rather than follow rigid doctrines.⁸⁶ These practices have made adaptation an institutional norm, transforming feedback from combat into policy refinement. The Navy's success in the Pacific thus reflected the cumulative value of procedural learning over technological advantages.

Amy Zegart connects this historical model to modern intelligence and counterterrorism reform. Her study of the September 11 intelligence failures identifies the absence of learning mechanisms as a primary source of institutional breakdown.⁸⁷ Bureaucratic structures reward compliance rather than critical review, preventing agencies from recognizing new types of threats. The Department of Homeland Security's efforts to implement lessons from the 9/11 Commission sought to emulate wartime learning systems through the creation of inter-agency review boards and information-sharing frameworks.⁸⁸ Although progress was uneven, these reforms demonstrated an awareness that defense organizations must evolve continually through self-assessment. Adaptive learning ensures that institutions remain responsive to emerging risks while avoiding the repetition of past mistakes.⁸⁹

Peter Perla's concept of the Cycle of Research and Learning reinforces the necessity of feedback loops that integrate analysis, simulation, and practice. He argues that wargaming and historical studies enable decision-makers to confront the human dimensions of uncertainty and refine their responses through iterative experimentation.⁹⁰ RAND's work on red-teaming applies the same principle to modern threats by emphasizing the inclusion of diverse perspectives in testing assumptions.⁹¹ These methodologies transform defense institutions into living systems of inquiry, capable of learning from both success and failure. The integration of behavioral experimentation,

⁸⁵ Hone, *Learning War*, 172–175.

⁸⁶ Miller, *War Plan Orange*, xvii–xxi.

⁸⁷ Zegart, "September 11 and the Adaptation Faliure," pp. 108–110.

⁸⁸ Department of Homeland Security, *Implementing 9/11 Commission Recommendations*, 7–8.

⁸⁹ Perla, "Wargaming and the Cycle of Research and Learning," pp. 199–202.

⁹⁰ Hicks et al., *Exploring Red Teaming*, 4–5.

⁹¹ Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 221–223.

ethical reasoning, and institutional feedback forms the basis for strategic learning. Such learning does not represent an episodic correction but a continuous process that strengthens decision-making through disciplined reflection and reform.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, pathways to stronger defense decision-making have emerged through the deliberate cultivation of behavioral, institutional, ethical, and adaptive mechanisms. From the wargames of the interwar U.S. Navy to the post-9/11 reforms of intelligence coordination, each reform cycle underscores the same principle: effective strategy depends on the ability to learn, reflect, and act collectively. Inclusivity and legality safeguard legitimacy, whereas behavioral experimentation and institutional reform enhance foresight and accountability. The integration of these pathways reveals that decision-making in national defense is not a singular event but rather an evolving process. History demonstrates that states capable of transforming lessons into policy achieve operational effectiveness and moral credibility. The enduring task for modern defense institutions is to maintain the balance between power and principle through continuous learning and ethical governance.

Case Studies in Defense Decision-Making

Decision-making in defense reflects the tension between strategic necessity, uncertainty, and human fallibility. From the miscalculations that sparked World War I to the narrow avoidance of nuclear war in 1962, national security decisions have consistently revealed how leaders balance limited information with immense consequences. Each era exposes a distinct pattern of institutional processes and psychological influences, showing that the quality of judgment is as decisive as material capability. By analyzing key historical cases, this section demonstrates that the frameworks of perception, organization, and ethics previously outlined are not abstract theories but are living determinants of war and peace. The selected case studies, World War I, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and the post-9/11 War on Terror, illustrate the interplay between cognition, bureaucracy, and political leadership that define defense policy outcomes.

World War I Decision-Making (1914)

The outbreak of World War I exemplifies how cognitive bias and institutional rigidity can transform regional tensions into a global catastrophe. As Levy and Vasquez explain, the July 1914 crisis evolved from a convergence of structural rivalries, alliance obligations, and elite misperceptions, rather than a unified plan for aggression.⁹² The decisions of German, Austrian, and Russian leaders were made under extreme uncertainty and were guided by conflicting assumptions about deterrence, prestige, and honor. Herwig argues that the statesmen of 1914 were not controlled by impersonal forces, but made conscious choices influenced by personal pride, strategic misjudgment, and fear of decline.⁹³ The inability to reconcile alliance commitments with national restraint created a self-reinforcing sequence of mobilization that leaders neither fully understood nor controlled.

Decision-making during the July Crisis also reflected deep institutional fragmentation among major powers. In Germany, civilian and military hierarchies operated under divergent priorities, leading to miscommunication regarding the consequences of the Schlieffen Plan.⁹⁴ Herwig notes that small circles of elites, often no more than ten individuals, controlled each nation's war decisions without systematic consultation or dissent, revealing how concentrated power amplified bias.⁹⁵ The pressures of speed and secrecy, reinforced by mobilization timetables, reduced the opportunities for deliberation. As a result, rational calculation gave way to reactive decision-making, producing what

⁹² Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, eds., *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3–5.

⁹³ Holger H. Herwig, “‘Military Doomsday Machine’? The Decisions for War 1914,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 13, no. 4 (2011): 2–4.

⁹⁴ Levy and Vasquez, *The Outbreak of the First World War*, 115–118.

⁹⁵ Herwig, “‘Military Doomsday Machine’?,” pp. 2–3.

Keiger describes as the “erosion of diplomatic flexibility” among European leaders who viewed compromise as weakness.⁹⁶ The process demonstrates how bureaucratic processes, once set in motion, constrain the political will to pause or reconsider.

The long-term consequences of 1914 underscore the ethical dimensions of strategic judgment. By prioritizing prestige and deterrence over proportionality, European leaders failed to anticipate the unprecedented human and political costs that followed the invasion. Herwig observes that the decision to escalate was not inevitable but stemmed from short-term thinking and a cultural fixation on honor that obscured rational analysis.⁹⁷ The collapse of diplomatic mediation and the rapid descent into war reveal the fragility of decision-making systems under stress. The lessons of 1914 remain vital for understanding how institutional processes, unchecked by ethical reflection or dissent, can produce catastrophic outcomes even among rational actors.

Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)

The Cuban Missile Crisis stands as a rare instance in which strategic restraint and structured deliberation prevented a global war. Allison’s analysis demonstrates that President Kennedy’s Executive Committee (ExComm) succeeded not because of perfect information, but through the deliberate application of competing decision models that challenged premature consensus.⁹⁸ By framing the confrontation through the lenses of rational actor, organizational, and governmental politics, Kennedy and his advisers recognized that bureaucratic interests could distort threat perception. This conceptual awareness helped them delay military action long enough to establish diplomatic alternatives to war. Janis further emphasizes that the ExComm avoided groupthink by institutionalizing dissent and encouraging structured debate, thereby preventing the cognitive closure that had characterized prior crises.⁹⁹ The process demonstrated that intellectual diversity and reflective judgment can counterbalance the psychological pressures of a crisis.

At the same time, Allison showed that the success of ExComm was contingent on the effective management of bureaucratic rivalry and information flow.¹⁰⁰ The United States government, fragmented across the Departments of Defense, State, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, produced conflicting assessments of Soviet intentions. Kennedy’s insistence on multiple decision frameworks allowed him to reinterpret intelligence data and reject simplistic assumptions about Soviet aggression. Janis’s theory of groupthink illustrates how earlier policy failures, such as the Bay of

⁹⁶ Levy and Vasquez, *The Outbreak of the First World War*, 252–253.

⁹⁷ Herwig, “‘Military Doomsday Machine’?,” pp. 5–6.

⁹⁸ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 2–3.

⁹⁹ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 35–37.

¹⁰⁰ Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 6–7.

Pigs, informed Kennedy's awareness of the need for dissenting voices.¹⁰¹ By ensuring the participation of officials with opposing perspectives, Kennedy cultivated a process that balanced political caution with strategic firmness. The resulting naval quarantine embodied a calculated middle ground that preserved credibility without escalating the situation into war.

The crisis also revealed the role of empathy and moral reasoning in defense decision making. Kennedy's recognition of shared risk and Khrushchev's willingness to negotiate privately reflected a mutual understanding of catastrophic stakes. Allison argued that the backchannel diplomacy that resolved the crisis demonstrated the practical power of conceptual flexibility and ethical restraint.¹⁰² By rejecting absolute military logic in favor of controlled risk, both leaders affirmed the principle that the quality of deliberation determines the morality and success of a strategy. The Cuban Missile Crisis thus remains a benchmark for decision-making processes that integrate cognitive awareness, institutional design, and ethical foresight.

Vietnam War (1960s–1970s)

The Vietnam War reveals how flawed intelligence, political calculations, and psychological conformity can undermine strategic judgment. Kramer's reassessment of the groupthink hypothesis shows that President Johnson's decision to escalate the war stemmed from overconfidence and social pressure within the policy elite.¹⁰³ Decision-makers relied on analogies with earlier conflicts and underestimated the resilience of Vietnamese nationalism. The closed deliberative climate discouraged critical evaluation of assumptions, reinforcing a shared illusion of control. Humphrey's study of Johnson's Tuesday Lunch meetings confirms that these informal gatherings concentrated authority among a small circle of advisers, replacing institutional debate with personal persuasion.¹⁰⁴ The exclusion of dissenting voices created an environment in which consensus was equated with correctness.

Johnson's preference for informal decision-making amplified the cognitive and political biases of his advisers. Humphrey documents that the Tuesday Lunch meetings evolved into the central mechanism for foreign policy during the war, bypassing the National Security Council and formal reporting channels.¹⁰⁵ This process fosters efficiency but sacrifices transparency and accountability. Kramer's analysis of organizational behavior demonstrates that this pattern exemplified a structural form of groupthink, where cohesion and loyalty outweighed analytical

¹⁰¹ Janis, *Groupthink*, 36–38.

¹⁰² Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 245–249.

¹⁰³ Roderick M. Kramer, "Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam Decisions 25 Years After: How Well Has the Groupthink Hypothesis Stood the Test of Time?," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 73, no. 2–3 (1998): 236–238.

¹⁰⁴ Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House," pp. 81–83.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 84–86.

rigor.¹⁰⁶ The administration's fear of political backlash discouraged the acknowledgment of uncertainty, leading to the continuation of an unwinnable war. Thus, the intersection of institutional secrecy and cognitive bias produces a tragic feedback loop between policy error and political self-preservation.

The consequences of these decisions highlight the moral and procedural failures in crisis management. Both Kramer and Humphrey note that the absence of structured dissent limits the government's ability to reassess escalation costs.¹⁰⁷ The failure to integrate diverse intelligence perspectives, combined with Johnson's emphasis on unity, perpetuated a false sense of strategic control. Ultimately, the Vietnam experience demonstrates that effective defense decision-making requires institutional safeguards against conformity and overconfidence in the decision-maker. The war's legacy reshaped U.S. civil-military relations and led to reforms designed to restore deliberative integrity to national security policy.

Post-9/11 War on Terror

The decision-making environment after September 11, 2001, marked a return to centralized executive control under the conditions of fear and urgency. Zegart argues that the U.S. intelligence community's failure to anticipate the attacks reflected deep structural rigidity rather than lack of information.¹⁰⁸ The decentralized and fragmented intelligence bureaucracy was unable to integrate warnings across agencies. Goepner notes that the subsequent creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sought to correct this fragmentation, but instead expanded the executive's operational reach without resolving coordination failures.¹⁰⁹ Early post-9/11 decisions, including the passage of the Patriot Act and the invasion of Iraq, reflected a pattern of overreaction driven by cognitive biases and political pressure. The urgency to act replaced the measured deliberation that characterized successful crisis management in 1962.

Hussain's analysis of DHS reforms shows that institutional adaptation encountered resistance because of overlapping jurisdictions and entrenched bureaucratic cultures.¹¹⁰ The drive for rapid consolidation produced confusion over accountability as agencies competed for authority and resources. Zegart's research supports this conclusion by demonstrating that intelligence agencies remained wedded to Cold War procedures, undermining efforts to produce timely strategic

¹⁰⁶ Kramer, "Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam Decisions," pp. 240–243.

¹⁰⁷ Kramer, "Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam Decisions," p. 260; Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House," pp. 95–96.

¹⁰⁸ Zegart, "September 11 and the Adaptation Failure," pp. 78–80.

¹⁰⁹ Erik W. Goepner, "Measuring the Effectiveness of America's War on Terror," *Parameters* 46, no. 1 (2016): 82–83.

¹¹⁰ Mehmood Hussain, "The Department of Homeland Security: A Decade of Reform and Resistance," *Journal of Homeland and National Security Perspectives* 5, no. 2 (2015): 90–92.

assessments.¹¹¹ The concentration of decision-making power in the executive branch further limited external oversight, allowing expansive interpretations of national security authority. Goepner observes that the resulting framework blurs the boundary between defense and domestic policy, challenging the traditional norms of democratic legitimacy.¹¹² These developments illustrate how institutional reform without cultural change can perpetuate old vulnerabilities in new ways.

The ethical implications of post-9/11 decision-making reveal an enduring trade-off between security and liberty. Hussain identified a pattern of institutional resistance to transparency, as agencies invoked national security to shield internal errors from scrutiny.¹¹³ Goepner's assessment of counterterrorism effectiveness concludes that strategic success cannot be measured solely by prevented attacks but must include the preservation of civil norms and procedural accountability.¹¹⁴ Together, these studies show that the War on Terror institutionalized a decision-making mode that prioritized speed and control at the expense of reflection and restraint. Compared to the Cuban Missile Crisis, where deliberation mitigated risk, the post-9/11 environment demonstrated how institutional fear could override the mechanisms of balanced judgment. The challenge for future defense policy lies in reconciling urgency with deliberative ethics to prevent the repetition of costly errors under the guise of necessity.

¹¹¹ Zegart, "September 11 and the Adaptation Failure," pp. 100–102.

¹¹² Goepner, "Measuring the Effectiveness of America's War on Terror," pp. 90–92.

¹¹³ Hussain, "The Department of Homeland Security," pp. 105–106.

¹¹⁴ Goepner, "Measuring the Effectiveness of America's War on Terror," pp. 92–94.

Conclusion

Throughout history, the success or failure of a defense strategy has depended less on material power than on the quality and integrity of the decisions that guide it. The central argument of this analysis is that defense policy is not defined solely by weapons or resources, but by how choices are made under uncertainty, which is influenced by cognitive, institutional, and ethical factors. Historical crises such as World War I, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and the War on Terror demonstrate that flawed decision-making can be as dangerous as any external threat. When leaders act without structured deliberation, dissent, or moral reflection, they magnify risks and erode legitimacy. Conversely, when institutions incorporate behavioral learning, ethical reasoning, and inclusive consultation, they enhance security and credibility. The moral dimension of defense policy is inseparable from its strategic dimension, as legitimacy sustains power as much as deterrence or capability. This synthesis confirms that defense decision-making is an enduring test of judgment, not merely of force or technology alone.

The case studies reveal that decision-making failures often stem from recurring weaknesses in perception, organization, and values. The leaders of 1914 succumbed to rigid alliances and overconfidence, while those in 1962 averted nuclear war by institutionalizing dissent and moral restraint. In Vietnam, secrecy and conformity eroded rational assessment, and post-9/11 institutions repeated similar mistakes under the new conditions of fear and urgency. These examples show that cognitive bias, institutional secrecy, and political short-termism persist across generations and adapt to each new context. They also confirmed that deliberate reflection and inclusive processes can correct such tendencies. Therefore, defense decisions represent the intersection of psychology, structure, and ethics, where human reasoning determines the fate of nations. History repeatedly demonstrates that legitimacy, not dominance, defines lasting strength in security policy.

To address these enduring challenges, modern defense institutions must cultivate adaptability, accountability, and moral awareness among their personnel. Behavioral tools such as wargaming and red teaming enhance foresight by revealing unseen vulnerabilities, while institutional reforms create the structures needed for transparent and coordinated decision-making. Ethical and legal accountability ensures that security policies align with humanitarian and democratic principles rather than expedient power. Adaptive learning further transforms defense organizations into systems capable of evolving in response to changing threats and technologies. These mechanisms collectively transform decision-making from reactive crisis management to continuous strategic reflection. By integrating cognition, organization, and morality, states can avoid the historical pattern of repeating preventable errors in their foreign policy. Thus, the pathway to stronger defense decision-making lies in balancing authority with conscience and innovation with restraint.

Ultimately, this analysis affirms that defense policy must be guided by principles as well as pragmatism. The lessons of history show that decisions grounded in evidence, ethics, and inclusion yield not only safer outcomes but also legitimate ones. The rigor, inclusivity, and moral grounding of defense decision-making sustain national security and democratic trust. For Agard Research Associates, these findings emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary studies that connect history, behavioral science, and policy analysis to improve institutional judgment. The legacy of past crises

offers not only caution but also instruction, reminding future policymakers that the strength of a nation rests on how wisely and ethically it chooses under pressure. In an era of evolving threats, the greatest defense lies not in the expansion of power but in the discipline of decision-making itself.

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