

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES IN MILITARY LEADERSHIP AT STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL LEVEL – DECISIVE FACTOR FOR THE SUCCESS OF MILITARY ACTIONS –

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The evolution of the global security environment, marked by uncertainty and complexity, requires a comprehensive approach of military leadership at the strategic and operational levels. This research paper analyses innovative approaches in military leadership, focusing on adaptability, the integration of emerging technologies and the development of cognitive and emotional skills of leaders. There are arguments brought to your attention that the success of military actions is not determined exclusively by technological or numerical superiority, a decisive role being played by the ability of leaders to anticipate and manage change, to make effective decisions under conditions of ambiguity and to coordinate multinational and inter-institutional structures. The decisive role of innovative leadership is highlighted in increasing organizational resilience and in achieving strategic and operational objectives in the contemporary security environment.

Keywords: military leadership; innovative approaches; global security environment; adaptability; organizational resilience;

INTRODUCTION

Military leadership has always played a decisive role in the success of military operations. History shows that victory did not always belong to the largest or most technologically advanced armies, but to those led by leaders capable of combining strategic vision, adaptability and discipline. Alexander the Great, for example, managed to conquer vast territories thanks to his ability to combine mobility and logistics with a coherent strategy and an overall vision of the situation. Hannibal remained in history through his operational ingenuity, using terrain and surprise to compensate for numerical inferiority. Napoleon revolutionized the organization of the army and the art of manoeuvre, but he also demonstrated the limits of a leadership that was too focused on his own will, the defeat in Russia being the classic example of the lack of sustainable logistics.

The 20th century brought dramatic lessons regarding the role of military leadership. In the Second World War, the Allies' ability to plan and logistically support a global campaign was decisive. Leaders like Eisenhower and Montgomery showed that success does not only lie in personal talent, but also in the art of coordinating coalitions and integrating resources. In the Cold War, strategists like Henry Kissinger and Lawrence Freedman emphasized the role of innovative strategic thinking in maintaining global balance.

Today, military leadership faces a much more complex reality. The concept of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) faithfully describes the current strategic environment. Hybrid warfare, information warfare, the proliferation of non-state actors and the emergence of new technologies (artificial intelligence, drones, cyberattacks, space warfare) force leaders to adopt innovative leadership models. Rigid hierarchical structures, specific to the industrial age, are insufficient. The modern commander must combine doctrinal rigour with flexibility and creativity.

This article aims to examine how innovative leadership – at the strategic and operational levels – is a determining factor in military effectiveness. In this regard, the comparative analysis method is used to assess the impact of different leadership models on military outcomes. The analysis begins with classical doctrinal foundations (Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Jomini, Liddell Hart, Huntington), continues with modern leadership models (transformative and adaptive) and integrates general conclusions from historical and contemporary conflicts: Second World War, Desert Storm, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine.

DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS OF MILITARY LEADERSHIP

Carl von Clausewitz introduced fundamental concepts for understanding war, such as “*friction*” and “*fog of war*”. By friction, Clausewitz meant the set of unforeseen obstacles that inevitably arise in the conduct of military operations: adverse weather, technical malfunctions, human errors, incomplete information. The “*fog of war*” refers to the structural uncertainty that affects any commander. In this context, the effective military leader is the one who possesses that “*coup d’œil*” – the strategic intuition that allows him to decide correctly in conditions of ambiguity.

The relevance of these concepts is still seen today. In Iraq and Afghanistan, friction took the form of asymmetric attacks, coordination problems between allies, and errors of cultural perception. In Ukraine, the fog of war is amplified by information warfare and the use of drones for reconnaissance and strike, which constantly change the operational picture.

Sun Tzu, in *The Art of War*, proposed a different vision: the perfect victory is the one achieved without fighting. Strategy means deception, adaptability and the use of the opponent’s weaknesses. The military leader must be able to analyse the confrontation environment and act accordingly, using the principle of economy of forces, thus avoiding the unnecessary consumption of resources.

In asymmetric conflicts, Sun Tzu’s principles are clearly relevant. Non-state actors, lacking conventional force, compensate through mobility, surprise and exploitation of the effects of psychological and information operations. Contemporary military leaders must learn to think not only in terms of frontal confrontation, but also in terms of perception and influence.

Antoine-Henri Jomini tried to transform the art of war into an exact science. He emphasized lines of operations and the concentration of forces at decisive points. His contribution was major for the development of staff work and planned thinking. However, this type of rigidity has been criticized: the manoeuvre wars of the 20th century showed that mathematical geometry cannot capture the unpredictability of the human factor and the environment.

B.H. Liddell Hart proposed “*indirect strategy*” as an alternative to direct confrontation. He emphasized that great victories are achieved through surprise, manoeuvre, and striking the adversary’s centres of gravity where he least expects it. Indirect strategy inspired both the Normandy campaign of 1944 and Operation *Desert Storm* of 1991, where coalition forces avoided a prolonged frontal confrontation by using manoeuvre and technological superiority to defeat the Iraqi armed forces.

Samuel Huntington introduced an essential dimension: the relationship between military leadership and civilian control. In his vision, the military must

remain subordinate to political authority, but must have professional autonomy to accomplish its mission. For multinational alliances such as NATO, this vision is crucial: military commanders must harmonize political directives with operational realities, avoiding both blind obedience and excessive independence.

Strategic leadership is not just military planning; it is the act of coherently integrating all instruments of national power and international alliances into a vision capable of responding to emerging threats. In the modern era, this integration must include military, political, economic, diplomatic, and informational dimensions.

ADAPTABILITY OF LEADERSHIP AT THE STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL LEVELS TO THE REALITIES OF CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

The modern strategic leader should be oriented towards the ability to anticipate changes in the global environment, the ability to formulate flexible visions and the power to mobilize the necessary resources. Without these traits, even the largest armed forces can become prisoners of their own inertia.

John Boyd, a Colonel in the US military aviation, formulated the OODA (Observe–Orient–Decide–Act) cycle, explaining that success belongs to the one who can process information faster, decide more correctly and act faster than the opponent. At the strategic level, this means that the leader must not only react, but also constantly create new situations, forcing the opponent to adapt.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq provided an example of the limits of insufficiently adapted strategic leadership. The initial military campaign was a rapid success due to technological superiority and the ability to project power. However, the lack of an innovative strategy for post-conflict stabilization created a power vacuum that was exploited by local and regional actors. Strategic leadership failed to anticipate social and political complexity, and the consequence was a protracted insurgency that undermined initial gains.

In Afghanistan, NATO forces demonstrated remarkable operational capacity, but strategic leadership failed to provide a coherent, long-term vision for state reconstruction. Insufficient integration of political, cultural, and economic factors reduced the effectiveness of military campaigns. Experience has shown that innovative strategic leadership is not just about winning battles, but also about creating the conditions for lasting peace.

Faced with these lessons, NATO developed the concept of a “*comprehensive approach*” – integrating military and civilian, national, and international efforts into a single, coherent strategy. It involves cooperation between military, governmental, and nongovernmental actors to address the complexity of contemporary conflicts. Innovative strategic leadership, in this context, involves not only military command, but also diplomacy, resource management and strategic communication.

Thus, it can be said that strategic success does not depend exclusively on the number of troops or technological performance, but on the ability of leaders to orchestrate all the instruments of power into a coherent and adaptable ensemble.

If strategic leadership sets the direction and objectives, operational-level leadership ensures their transposition into concrete campaigns and operations. It is the level where strategic intent meets the reality of the field.

Originating from the Prussian military tradition, the concept of *Auftragstaktik* – known today as *Mission Command* – requires the senior leader to establish the intent and objective, but to leave subordinates the freedom to decide how to execute the mission. This decentralization of decision-making increases agility and allows rapid adaptation to changing battlefield conditions.

In modern conflicts, where communication can be disrupted and situations change from one minute to the next, mission command becomes essential. The operational leader creates the framework and organizational culture that allow for initiative without losing the coherence of the whole.

The war in Ukraine provides an eloquent contemporary example. Ukrainian forces, although numerically and technologically inferior, have capitalized on tactical initiative and operational flexibility. Small units have used commercial drones, real-time information, and decentralized manoeuvres to create disproportionate effects. This is the practical expression of innovative operational leadership, able to compensate for material deficiencies through creativity and adaptability.

In contrast, the adversary has demonstrated structural rigidity, maintaining centralized chains of command and reacting slowly to changes in the situation. The result has been a loss of initiative and vulnerability to smaller, more agile forces.

Operation *Allied Force* in Kosovo has shown how leadership can turn political limitations into an advantage. Although constrained by the absence of UN approval and the desire to avoid civilian casualties, NATO managed to use air power in an innovative way to achieve political objectives.

Operation *Desert Storm* was also a demonstration of innovative leadership. Coalition commanders avoided a frontal confrontation, opting for a large-scale manoeuvre that disrupted the Iraqi armed forces and led to a quick victory. The main lesson: operational innovation maximizes benefits and minimizes costs when combined with rigorous planning and execution.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND THE LOGISTICS DIMENSION

In the 21st century, technology is no longer just a tool in support of war, but a central domain of confrontation. Artificial intelligence, drones, cyberwarfare, and the competition for supremacy in space are radically changing the balance of power.

Drones have transformed the battlefield, providing a real-time operational picture and precision strikes at low cost. Artificial intelligence promises an unprecedented acceleration of information processing and decision-making. Autonomous systems can act where the risk to humans is too great. However, these innovations raise ethical dilemmas and new risks: *Who is responsible for the decisions of algorithms? What happens if an autonomous system is manipulated or cyber-attacked?*

Modern leadership involves not only using new technologies, but also managing them responsibly. The commander must understand both the advantages and vulnerabilities and avoid excessive dependence on systems that can be compromised.

“Amateurs talk tactics, professionals talk logistics” – this expression, often attributed to General Omar Bradley, summarizes the reality of the battlefield. Liddell Hart considered logistics *“the lifeline of strategy”*.

In the Second World War, the US’s ability to project force across Europe and the Pacific was decisive. Operation *Overlord*, in Normandy in 1944, would not have been possible without extensive logistical preparation, including the construction of artificial harbours (Mulberry harbours). In Vietnam, the adversary’s logistics – the famous *“Ho Chi Minh Trail”* – allowed resistance against a much larger force. In Operation *Desert Storm*, the rapid transport of over 500,000 troops and millions of tons of equipment demonstrated that logistics can decide the speed and success of a campaign.

Today, the conflict in Ukraine confirms that logistics is decisive. Maintaining the flow of ammunition, equipment and fuel has become a test of national resilience and international alliance. Innovative leadership must treat logistics not as a technical detail, but as a top-tier strategic area, where creativity and anticipation are vital.

THE COGNITIVE AND INFORMATIONAL DIMENSION

In the information age, victory is not measured only in conquered territories, but also in the created perceptions. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui anticipated, in *Unrestricted Warfare*, that the future war will include economic, informational and cultural domains, and that weapons will be not only guns but also ideas.

Joseph Nye introduced the concept of *soft power*, explaining that cultural influence and the ability to attract can be as effective as military or economic pressure. In modern warfare, these concepts converge: information warfare becomes a decisive environment of confrontation.

Disinformation campaigns, fake news, the use of deepfakes and manipulation of social networks have the potential to weaken social cohesion and undermine the will to resist. In Ukraine, information warfare has been almost as intense as kinetic warfare: both sides have tried to influence global perception and the morale of their own populations.

NATO has recognized this reality, creating centres of excellence in strategic communication and psychological operations. Innovative leadership involves integrating these tools, strengthening psychological resilience, and cultivating an organizational culture capable of withstanding information pressure. Thus, the commander is no longer just a manager of troops and resources, but also an architect of perceptions, a leader capable of winning the battle of narratives.

CONCLUSIONS

Sustainable military success depends on the coherent integration of the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Ambitious strategies remain sterile if they cannot be translated into effective campaigns. Tactical victories become useless if they do not serve a clear operational and strategic objective. Modern innovative leadership is the glue between these levels. It ensures coherence and relevance, transforming local initiative into global effects and permanently adapting strategic objectives to the reality of the battlefield.

In conclusion, innovative military leadership is shaped as a synthesis between the classical foundations of strategic thinking and the adaptability requirements specific to the contemporary era. The theoretical legacy of authors such as Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Jomini, Liddell Hart or Huntington continues to provide essential conceptual landmarks, but they can no longer be applied rigidly. Therefore they must be reinterpreted and integrated into a flexible framework, capable of responding to the challenges of an operational environment under constant change. Thus, tradition and innovation are not mutually exclusive, but complement each other, constituting the foundation of effective military leadership.

Also, innovation in military leadership is not reduced to the introduction of state-of-the-art technologies, but requires a much more complex approach. It means the ability to integrate multiple dimensions – logistical, informational, perceptual and cultural – into a coherent whole, which provides both operational mobility and strategic legitimacy. This holistic perspective allows the transformation of resources and information into sustainable competitive advantages on the battlefield.

The analysis of relevant case studies – the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine – clearly demonstrates that the lack of adaptive and innovative strategic and operational leadership can cancel out tactical gains. Victory achieved in specific confrontations risks being compromised when there is no coherent vision to ensure continuity and exploitation of the results. Thus, recent experiences show that military success is not measured only by the won battles, but by the ability to transform tactical advantages into long-term stability and security.

In conclusion, we can say that, in a strategic environment characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), innovative leadership becomes not just an option, but a doctrinal and professional obligation. Its absence can condemn military organizations to stagnation or failure, while its presence represents the guarantee of resilience and relevance in the face of emerging challenges. In this context, innovation in military leadership is not configured as a theoretical luxury, but as an indispensable condition for survival and operational efficiency.

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