

COMPETITION STRATEGIES AND THE ACTIVE-DUTY FORCE: **Assessing and Selecting the Right People for an Uncertain Future**

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When the US Army produced *The Army People Strategy* in 2019, leadership called for a cultural shift in the personnel-management system. Army leaders described the creation of a twenty-first century talent-management enterprise complete with policies, programs, and processes that recognize and capitalize on the unique knowledge, skills, and behaviors every member of the Army team possesses. The enterprise would then allow the Army to employ everyone to maximum effect within a rapidly evolving security environment.¹

The authors of the people strategy identified the Army's way forward; the next step is implementation and the data to assist is newly available. Current efforts associated with the people strategy are focused on eliminating leaders who demonstrate undesirable attributes (such as being counterproductive or toxic) but have yet to leverage the data to select the absolute best leaders. With four years of Battalion Commander Assessment Program and Colonels Command Assessment Program data collected and analyzed, Army leadership can now take the next step toward the vision of placing “greater emphasis on acquiring the right people,” reducing attrition, and achieving the desired contribution to readiness by aligning unique attributes and talents.²

Assessment programs have produced data that has illuminated the cognitive and noncognitive strengths, weaknesses, and differences between current leaders. Unfortunately, senior leaders without access to the data and information are the ones slating existing talent. In current practice, the Army is not implementing the full complement of data that could help in selecting the right talent for the right jobs. The compilation of the four years of data is now mature enough to enable technology and leaders to move beyond eliminating those with undesirable attributes, and reward those who possess more desirable traits than their cohort populations. Now is the time to integrate disciplined selection to ensure the Army cultivates talent to achieve the greatest impact possible on the Army's most important priority: warfighting.

1 Headquarters, Department of the Army, *The Army People Strategy* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, October 2019), 12.

2 Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Army People Strategy*, 6.

STRATEGIC FUTURES

In the future, competition below the threshold of armed conflict will require specialization cultivated through assessments (and corresponding development) within the existing force to inform recruitment and retention through key-leader slating requirements and to achieve economies of force that deter violence with the lowest cost to manpower. Who should the Army select (internally and externally) to build and sustain the force for an uncertain future? The answer to that question depends on the strategic environment, encompassing only one of two broad narratives for the next five years.

In the first narrative, strategic competition below the threshold of armed conflict dominates interactions between great and aspiring powers. In the first narrative's environment, violence between great powers remains indirect and relegated to state-sponsored criminal activity, insurgency, terrorism, or conventional proxy wars. In Europe, US and NATO combat-credible postures deter Russian incursions against NATO allies. In the Asia-Pacific region, Chinese antagonism persists, yet does not warrant coalition responses to aggression against Taiwan. In the Middle East, violence persists between competing Israeli and Iranian regional goals, but war does not cascade into a broader Arab-Israeli conflict. The world in the first narrative is the closest to a visage of peace the international community can expect to get.³

But in the second narrative, US aspirations for protracted competition break down, resulting in great-power conflict not seen in the world since the culmination of World War II. Recruiting, retention, and advancement change dramatically in the second scenario as large-scale ground combat overcomes barriers to collective-action problems by demanding individual action, legally and with realized threats to US systems and ways of life. The large national mobilization of the second narrative requires more careful study.

The world will likely persist within the first narrative. Large-scale ground combat between great powers will remain limited. Violence will evolve through proxy conflicts, regional wars, state-sponsored insurgencies, and other activity that avoids inciting direct conflict with another great power. In the environment of the first narrative, military-aged men and women must understand peace is not the absence of conflict, but the appearance of certain forms of violence, and fighting on the outposts of the world order to sustain such a peace is the best investment in his or her personal future. The first narrative presents the hardest recruiting and retention environment, requiring informed selection metrics achieved through assessments.

BETTER TOOLS, BETTER SYSTEMS, SAME VISION: CLARIFY THE PROBLEM

To understand how existing data can inform the Army selection process to equip the force for the aforementioned challenges in recruiting and retention, one must first understand what the Army is assessing. To begin understanding the Army's assessments, one must simply review the Army leadership requirements model as defined in *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22. At the macrolevel, the model identifies both desired attributes and competencies. The identified attributes include character, presence, and intellect. The identified competencies include leading, developing, and achieving. Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 then describes each of the attributes and competencies to identify their microelements.

The assessment programs align with both the macro and microelements in the leadership requirements model. A quick look at the attributes and competencies reveals raters and senior raters at every level are developing and assessing many (though not all) the desired attributes. As such, one's current understanding of the individual attributes and competencies used for selection is subjective. Although subjective assessments have an important place in the Army's selection process, the Army can more comprehensively understand an individual's strengths and weaknesses and optimize the selection processes if the Army begins to integrate and combine subjective assessments with the objective results the existing assessment programs generate. The Army must refine its current subjective selection processes to include all available data, both subjective and objective. Newly available data will provide the objective view missing from the current processes and balance the subjective assessments commanders provide.

3 This is the sort of peace John Lewis Gaddis believed was feasible in a great-power struggle. Commenting on the Cold War in 1986, John Lewis Gaddis, "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System," *International Security* 10, no. 4 (Spring 1986): 142.

Currently, all levels of officer professional military education and all Army assessment programs (such as the Battalion Commander Assessment Program and Colonels Command Assessment Program) are collecting objective assessment data which more clearly identifies individual strengths and weaknesses. One module in the Colonels Command Assessment Program is the strategic leader exercise. Now in its fifth year, the strategic leader exercise is providing the Army with powerful indicators of strategic potential. The data is identifying and revealing stark differences between those who have strategic potential and those who do not. The Army could adapt current personnel systems to leverage the growing body of analysis and the data the strategic leader exercise collects further. An individual's thinking skills, communication skills, and cultural skills are examples of key differences which become clearer when assessed objectively and compared against other individuals in the Army-wide assessed cohort. Whereas the subjective assessments may show little difference between individuals, adding newly available, objective data more clearly shows unique differences. To date, Army leaders have been forced to make selections with an incomplete picture of an individual. Emerging data and processes from the Colonels Command Assessment Program better equip those charged with the personnel-selection process to make the best selection decisions based upon accepted attributes in Army Doctrine Publication 6-22.

The Army should no longer rely primarily on senior leaders' personal experiences with individuals alone, and the Army doesn't have to anymore. Although the technical and tactical expertise of emerging leaders is nonnegotiable, the current influx of assessment data provides additional insight into many of the desirable attributes and talents the Army has defined; many of which the Army can only accurately understand through objective assessments. With the availability of assessment data, the Army needs to break its current focus on identifying those with undesirable traits, and its reliance on personal knowledge, and transition to a system that also recognizes and includes the positive attributes the assessments reveal. To win the nation's future wars, the Army must begin to select the absolute best at echelon. Although the Army may take great pride in getting personnel decisions right most of the time, the future demands the best person be in the right job every time. Better integrating all available data and assessment result analyses into the selection processes will ensure the future success of the Army and the country.

Within branches and across the Army, understanding the information the objective assessments reveal can provide the next level of necessary detail and truly allow data-enabled decision making. Exposing assessment data to the Army's leaders would change the results of the current slating process. Existing data suggests including all the objective data from the current assessments could change the current slating processes by as much as 10 to 20 percent. One of the most important factors to consider is the holistic nature of assessment data. By design, the current batteries of assessments compare officers against a much larger population than current subjective assessments (hundreds of officers versus tens). An officer in the top quartile locally could very well rank much lower when compared to hundreds of other candidates.

Equally important is the assessments' ability to compare candidates against a host of important knowledge, skills, and behaviors simultaneously. Whether the assessments are focused on down-and-in or up-and-out performance measures, current objective assessments provide observable trends and levels of consistency which are easy to interpret and which will show significant and meaningful differences. For example, without access to assessment data, Army leaders could unknowingly choose officers ranked between 75 and 100 in a 100-officer cohort over officers in the top 25 for strategic positions. With the objective data, leaders at all levels will be able to understand individual potential holistically and will be better able to align individuals with positional requirements. Finally, without operating knowledge of the assessment data, the Army is missing a valuable opportunity to understand the strengths and weaknesses of cohort groups, which would allow the Army to make informed refinements to professional military education to address the gaps the assessments reveal.

CONCLUSION

The Army has programmatically addressed many of the key concepts within *The Army People Strategy*, but the Army has yet to achieve the strategic end-state fully in light of newly available data. *The Army People Strategy* adequately identifies the requirement for the Army to assess and select talent from within the force properly. Correspondingly, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 identifies the desirable attributes and competencies required for individual and organizational success. The blueprint for what the Army must accomplish is in place and the Army has aggressively invested in building a culture of assessment-informed decision making. The single factor the Army needs to achieve the desired outcomes is simple: a

data-governance and analytics strategy to integrate and leverage the massive amounts of available assessment data fully and meaningfully to enable decision making.

To achieve its desired outcomes, the Army must be culturally comfortable with integrating existing subjective data into objective assessment data. The data, when properly presented, will fully equip leaders to make informed decisions. The absence of assessment data is currently tying Army leadership's hands, denying Army leaders the opportunity to make fully informed decisions. The urgency of integrating assessment data cannot be understated. Fully implementing concepts within *The Army People Strategy* is fundamental to driving both internal promotional integrity and the assessment-based understanding needed to assist in recruiting and promoting the next generation of soldiers and leaders. The obligations of the US armed forces are expanding under global competition strategies. Those selected to develop competition strategies to lead, fight, and win must necessarily be the best the Army has ever produced. Good enough is not good enough. Data-informed decision making in personnel selection and recruitment will directly enable the Army's combat lethality and enable the Army to retain a competitive edge in an uncertain future.

AUTHOR BIOS

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