Agentic Warfare and the Future of Military Operations

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The U.S. military's 200-year-old Napoleonic staff system is too slow for an era where AI agents can sense, decide, and act in milliseconds. China's People's Liberation Army is optimizing to paralyze U.S. command structures through cyber, electronic, and long-range strikes by exploiting the rigidity of legacy staffs.

- CSIS Futures Lab tested three alternative models (network, relational, adaptive) for restructuring military staffs to take advantage of AI. Smaller, feedback-driven staffs outperformed larger legacy teams in generating viable options quickly, turning speed into a combat advantage.

- Congress should consider operationalizing the White House's new AI Action Plan through legislation to support the administration in implementing the plan and testing new staff processes and approaches to military planning.

By Benjamin Jensen, Jose M. Macias, Yasir Atalan

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

As AI revolutionizes military operations, traditional staff structures rooted in the Napoleonic era are rapidly becoming obsolete. Staff are often perceived as too large, too resistant to adaptation, and too top-heavy, resulting in a potential decisionmaking disadvantage in future conflicts. However, modern conflict now requires operational agility, speed, and distributed decisionmaking—features incompatible with legacy, hierarchical command systems. The Department of Defense (DOD) can replace today's industrial-age military staff organizations with smaller, nimbler, AI-enabled command elements able to out-cycle adversaries such as China. By integrating AI into staff roles, the United States can increase tempo, adaptability, and survivability against technologically advanced adversaries. China's military doctrine explicitly aims to disrupt and paralyze U.S. command networks; failing to modernize staff structures will leave U.S. forces vulnerable. New AI-enabled planning and staff models that emphasize real-time feedback loops between humans and AI agents will enable rapid response to changing battlefield conditions.

LEGISLATIVE OR POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Congress plays a pivotal role in enabling the DOD to transition toward AI-enabled staff structures. To prepare for future conflicts, lawmakers should consider including a line item in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026 (NDAA), Sec. 4201 Research Development, Test and Evaluation, to fund a multiyear experimentation campaign led by the Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office (CDAO). This campaign should be modeled on efforts like the Global Information Dominance Experiments (GIDE).

Congressional appropriations must also close the "compute gap" by investing in high-performance, classified cloud architectures and resilient battlefield networks. To close the compute gap, Congress could leverage Sec. 1621 of the current draft of the FY 2026 NDAA, which directs the public-private cyber partnership to identify the optimal funding required to close the compute gap and support the execution of Sec. 1625 modification of the high-performance computing roadmap.

Further, professional military education must be reformed to include AI literacy, algorithm auditing, and prompt engineering to ensure a new generation of "AI facilitators." Legislative oversight of this transformation could include annual reports on progress and wargaming results, possibly tied to NDAA requirements.

CHALLENGES & RISKS

Transforming military staff for agentic warfare faces significant institutional, technical, and operational risks. Resistance to change

within the services may hinder experimentation, especially when new models challenge traditional command hierarchies. AI integration also creates new cyber vulnerabilities; adversaries like China may target distributed decision networks with electronic warfare or AI model poisoning. Human overreliance on AI-generated insights poses additional challenges. If officers blindly follow or distrust machine recommendations, the effectiveness of decisionmaking deteriorates. Moreover, building explainable AI and maintaining trust in agentic outputs requires robust audit trails and sustained congressional oversight. Finally, without investment in education and infrastructure, the United States may fall behind authoritarian competitors who can adapt more rapidly and with fewer bureaucratic constraints. The United States cannot accelerate AI adoption in the U.S. military without reforming professional military education, a need highlighted in the recently released national AI plan.[1]

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure coordination and synchronization in decentralized, AI-enhanced decisionmaking environments. The findings consistently showed that while decentralized decisionmaking structures like the networked and relational staff models enhanced tempo and flexibility, they introduced substantial risks of fragmentation, conflicting priorities, and desynchronization—especially under adversary pressure during blockade, firepower strike, and landing scenarios.

- Launch a multiyear campaign of experimentation. The single most important thing the DOD can do is sustain aggressive experiments that test different approaches to building new staff structures better suited to agentic warfare than their Napoleonic precursors. This will require an agile approach to experimentation that, consistent with the CDAO's GIDE, uses live user feedback to iteratively develop and field prototypes. To support this, Congress should create and fund a mandated reporting cycle that delivers a mix of service, the DOD, and external evaluations to DOD leadership, likely the deputy secretary of defense, with Congress tracking progress.[2] These evaluations should focus on benchmarking AI models relative to different military missions and provide an external evaluation of progress made in deploying AI agents.

- Invest in computational infrastructure. A robust computational backbone is essential to ensure seamless integration of AI across decisionmaking nodes, enabling high-speed, secure, and resilient communication even in contested environments. Despite calls for budget cuts, it is not clear whether the DOD currently has the depth of computational infrastructure required to support agentic warfare in peacetime, much less in contested wartime environments.

- Invest in high-performance computing and distributed AI processing to allow for real-time analysis at the edge of operations, even when disconnected from centralized networks.[3] These investments should include cooperative efforts with entities like the National Science Foundation and Department of Commerce to ensure there is a robust, resilient network of infrastructure required to both run an information-age economy and support the emergence of agentic warfare.

- Enhance human capital for AI-driven decisionmaking. Personnel remain the critical link between AI-driven insights and strategic execution. Consider funding the DOD to stand up training programs that equip staff officers with the skills necessary to operate in decentralized, AI-augmented environments.[4] This should include training officers in structured decision arbitration, ensuring they can synchronize competing AI recommendations without creating decision bottlenecks. The enactment of a bill to reform professional military education and train DOD personnel, similar to the H.R. 9903 Next Generation Military Education Act, to amend the 2020 NDAA Sec. 256 AI education strategy, would demonstrate Congress's commitment to upskilling DOD personnel.

Table 1: Three Agentic Staff Options Examined

Model	Core Idea	Human Role	Primary Risk
Networked	Every traditional staff section pairs with its own AI "functional" agent; flat web of nodes	Super-empowered specialists curate data	Cyberattack; synchronization can falter across functional agents
Relational	Clusters of multi-agent netdoms generate competing plans; elite switchers broker the best answer	Switchers arbitrate among agent clusters	Switchers become single points of failure under pressure
Adaptive	Continuous loops of planning-execution-assessment, driven by AI agents and human facilitators	Facilitators fuse feedback and adjust strategy	Must tame information overload and specify decision thresholds (e.g., authorities)

Source: Authors' analysis.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Benjamin Jensen and Matthew Strohmeyer, *Agentic Warfare and the Future of Military Operations: Rethinking the Napoleonic Staff* (Washington, DC: CSIS, July 17, 2025), https://www.csis.org/analysis/rethinking-napoleonic-staff.

"Critical Foreign Policy Decisions Benchmark," CSIS, Futures Lab, accessed August 15, 2025, https://www.csis.org/programs/futures-lab/projects/critical-foreign-policy-decisions-benchmark.

Ian Reynolds, "Toward Reliable AI, from the Bottom Up," CSIS, *Commentary*, July 28, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/toward-reliable-ai-bottom.

Ian Reynolds, "Benchmarking as a Path to International AI Governance," CSIS, *Commentary*, August 5, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/benchmarking-path-international-ai-governance.

Benjamin Jensen and Ian Reynolds, *Why Tocqueville Would Embrace AI Benchmarking: Charting a Path for the Future of Democracy in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (Washington, DC: CSIS, July 28, 2025), https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-tocqueville-would-embrace-ai-benchmarking-charting-path-future-democracy-age.

Benjamin M. Jensen, Christopher Whyte, and Scott Cuomo, *Information in War: Military Innovation, Battle Networks, and the Future of Artificial Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ENDNOTES

1   The White House, Winning the Race: America's AI Action Plan (Washington, DC: July 2025), 11–12; see also 10 U.S.C. Part II, Chs. 37, 38, 42.

2   *10 U.S.C. § 118c* (Armed Services).

3   *10 U.S.C. § 125a* (Armed Services, Reform: Improvement of Efficacy and Efficiency).

4   *10 U.S.C. § 125a* (Armed Services, Reform: Improvement of Efficacy and Efficiency).

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