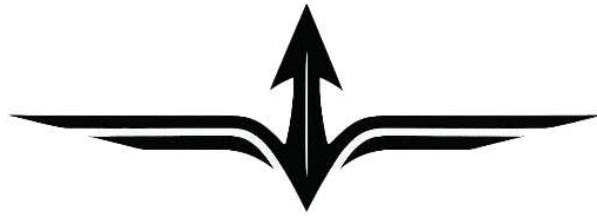


# Chapter 12



## Lead at the Edge

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*“Is it not the manner in which the leaders carry out the task of command, of impressing their resolution in the hearts of others, that makes them warriors...?”<sup>2</sup>*

— Lt. Gen. Gerhard von Scharnhorst  
Chief of the Prussian General Staff, 1813

### Why the Warrior Ethos Matters Now

The enduring warrior ethos—defined by courage, honor, self-sacrifice, and trust—has bound fighters to one another and to the societies they defend for millennia.<sup>3</sup> From the shields of Athenian

hoplites at Marathon to the muskets of Washington's citizen-soldiers outside Boston,<sup>4</sup> and now to platoon leaders navigating contested, all-domain battlefields, this ethos answers war's most enduring question: *Why risk everything?*

In a society fractured by political polarization and disinformation, fewer than one percent of Americans wear the uniform—and fewer still understand what animates those who do.<sup>5</sup> When the warrior ethos erodes, the consequences become strategic: recruitment falters, cohesion weakens, and battlefield discipline—the final safeguard against inhumanity—deteriorates. History offers a hard truth: restoring fractured moral foundations often carries a heavy cost.

Colonel S. L. A. Marshall warned in *Men Against Fire* that when soldiers “become fearful in combat, the moral incentive can restore them...but when they become hopeless...they have become oblivious to all things.” British theorist Colonel G. F. R. Henderson expressed the same danger more starkly: “Unless the soldier is animated by something higher than mechanical obedience...panic, shirking, and wholesale surrender” will follow.<sup>6</sup> No matter how advanced the arsenal, battlefield collapse begins in the moral domain.

### *The Alphabet of Victory*

Strategic leadership in an era of competitive multipolarity must begin with preserving and projecting the warrior ethos. This is the alphabet of victory: it begins with Ethos, requires Adaptability and Connection, and culminates in Decision.

Leadership at the edge rests on four interdependent attributes captured in the E-A-C-D framework. Together, they form two intersecting axes of command:

**Conduct (The Vertical Axis):** Comprising Ethos and Decision, this axis anchors the leader’s internal moral spine, providing the clarity required to act under ambiguity.

**Reach (The Horizontal Axis):** Comprising Connection and Adaptability, this axis expands the leader’s external influence—enabling the leader to bridge agencies and maneuver faster than the adversary.

Doctrine tells us what to do; the E-A-C-D framework defines the operating logic for how to do it. It translates the timeless principles of the profession of arms into disciplined judgment at the edge, where strategy is ultimately decided.

### *Empowerment at the Edge*

In the fluid Indo-Pacific battlespace—where tactical actions unfold under global scrutiny and span multinational coalitions—leadership can no longer rely on rigid, centralized control. The edge of conflict demands clarity under pressure and the application of E-A-C-D at every level of the formation. Whether a theater commander or a small-unit leader at a remote node, every warrior must be empowered to act as a strategic integrator.

The complexities of all-domain warfare require not the abandonment of mission command, but its fullest realization<sup>7</sup>—the transformation of decentralized execution from a doctrinal ideal into a lived reality.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, while algorithms may accelerate the tempo of warfare, they cannot replace the moral courage required to lead. It is the empowered human mind—capable of maintaining Ethos while executing a disciplined Decision—that provides the decisive edge. This framework is not a toolkit for the few but a mindset for the many, ensuring that every American warrior can navigate the friction of the modern battlespace with precision and purpose.

### **Ethos: Moral Foundation (Conduct)**

Military service in a republic is not a contract of convenience—it is a covenant.<sup>9</sup> This bond ties the individual’s “unlimited liability” to the enduring trust of the nation, establishing Ethos as the moral foundation that anchors authority and trust. As General Sir John Hackett observed, the essential basis of military life is the ordered application of force under that liability—a commitment that “sets the man who embraces this life somewhat apart.”<sup>10</sup>

That principle—not pay, promotion, or politics—transforms services from an occupation into stewardship and violence from raw force into legitimate defense. In the E-A-C-D framework, Ethos serves as the ballast of the vertical axis—Conduct—providing the moral weight necessary to remain steady under the pressure of the edge. Without this anchor, leadership loses its orientation; the exercise of power becomes untethered, and the leader risks drifting into the self-serving path of the rogue.

### *The Enduring Covenant*

Each service expresses its ethos in distinct terms. The Army extols loyalty, duty, and selfless service. The Navy calls for honor,

courage, and commitment—a triad echoed by its special operations community, the SEALs, in the daily pledge to “earn your Trident.”<sup>11</sup> The Marine Corps upholds these same virtues through discipline and sacrifice. The Air Force emphasizes integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do; the Coast Guard stresses honor, respect, and devotion to duty; and the Space Force affirms character, connection, commitment, and courage.

The words differ, but the heartbeat is the same: courage to face danger and voice unwelcome truths; honor expressed through integrity so steady that a leader’s word anchors planning and action; self-sacrifice in subordinating comfort and ambition to mission and team; and trust—the assurance that comrades will hold fast, commanders will employ their forces wisely, and the nation will stand behind its warriors when the stakes are highest.

### *Cohesion and Ethical Restraint*

Decades of operational study point to a consistent truth: from Normandy’s hedgerows to Kunar’s valleys, warriors fight not for ideology or orders alone, but for each other. Charles Moskos found that unit cohesion—the deep, lateral bond between soldiers—was the principal engine of combat effectiveness.<sup>12</sup> S. L. A. Marshall likewise concluded that a soldier’s willingness to fight rests less on abstract patriotism than on reputation within the unit: “When a soldier is unknown to the men around him,” Marshall wrote, “he has relatively little reason to fear losing the one thing that he is likely to value more highly than life—his reputation as a man among other men.”<sup>13</sup>

Samuel Huntington expanded this insight, describing military professionalism as the fusion of technical competence with a moral responsibility to society.<sup>14</sup> Together, these perspectives confirm that battlefield advantage grows less from weaponry or doctrine than from unshakable bonds of trust.

That same trust also acts as a restraint. Rules of engagement carry real weight only when internalized as conviction: *We don't do that*. A sailor boarding a hostile vessel or a soldier handling detainees is far less likely to cross ethical lines if doing so would dishonor the unit or betray public confidence.

In an era of omnipresent cameras and contested narratives, a single lapse at the tactical edge can fracture legitimacy across an entire theater. Upholding an internal moral standard is therefore not merely a matter of individual character; it is a strategic requirement. In the Indo-Pacific, where the narrative of legitimate defense is as contested as the territory itself, Ethos becomes the primary shield against adversary disinformation.

### *Modern Threats to the Warrior Ethos*

The warrior ethos now confronts corrosive forces more insidious than battlefield stress: cultural fragmentation, weaponized narratives, and techno-romanticism.

Cultural fragmentation erodes shared identity. Fewer than one percent of Americans serve in uniform,<sup>15</sup> drawn disproportionately from specific regions and warrior families, while the number of living veterans—our nation's repositories of sacrifice—continues to decline.<sup>16</sup> As this population shrinks, the civic ties forged through shared service risk atrophy.<sup>17</sup> Estrangement breeds indifference;

when the profession of arms becomes invisible to the public it serves, sacrifice turns abstract. Admiral Mike Mullen warned that a people uninformed about the military's burden are "inevitably unable to fully grasp the scope of the responsibilities our Constitution levies upon them."<sup>18</sup>

Weaponized narratives pose a second, more tactical danger. Foreign adversaries and domestic actors alike recast deterrence as provocation, service members as instruments, and operations as overreach. When warriors begin to doubt the legitimacy of their mission or the integrity of their cause, the lateral bonds of cohesion and the vertical restraints of ethical conduct begin to erode.

The third threat—techno-romanticism—is perhaps the most subtle. It reduces war to a systems-engineering problem, tempting leaders to treat combat as a matter of data throughput. In this abstraction, the warrior becomes a node—depersonalized and stripped of moral agency. When responsibility is deferred to algorithms, human judgment is engineered out of the process, and the ethos itself begins to decay.<sup>19</sup>

Modernization cannot simply be about faster processors; it must also protect the human element that provides the decisive edge. If the warrior is depersonalized by technology or delegitimized by narrative, we risk losing the very essence of Conduct.

### *The Leader's Moral Imperative*

Preserving the warrior ethos in an age of societal fragmentation and technological abstraction is among a leader's foremost duties. This responsibility cannot be delegated to chaplains, personnel systems,

or annual ethics briefings; it must be modeled daily and enforced at every echelon.

In an era of global livestreams, leadership is a public act of values. It is demonstrated when commanders credit partners before citing U.S. contributions, recognize subordinates before themselves, and accept responsibility for failure—especially when that failure is costly.

**Command at the Edge.** As distributed operations span time zones and domains,<sup>20</sup> commanders must preserve cohesion through clarity of intent, consistency of recognition, and a deliberate, visible presence. The accelerating integration of autonomous systems demands a similarly principled framing: technology may extend Conduct, but it can never replace responsibility for it.<sup>21</sup> Every new capability must be ethically stress-tested, with junior innovators encouraged to challenge assumptions so that moral agency is never deferred to machines or code.

**Narrative Fluency.** Equally essential is narrative fluency.<sup>22</sup> Every leader—platoon commander to the senior enlisted advisor—must be able to explain why their mission matters to allies, partners, and the American people. This is not a “soft skill” but a strategic shield against disinformation and a vital means of sustaining legitimacy in contested spaces.

Strategic leaders who internalize these imperatives elevate the warrior ethos from a slogan to a system—a resilient operating logic binds forces across services, allies, and domains. Without that moral spine, no amount of technology or firepower can sustain authority. With it, even modest forces can generate disproportionate effects through clarity of purpose, disciplined execution, and mutual trust.

## *Culture as Combat Power*

Culture is not ornamental; it is operational power. In the Indo-Pacific, where tactical actions are livestreamed and alliances hinge on perception, the ability to communicate values and foster a resilient identity has become central to both deterrence and warfighting effectiveness.

**Explaining Why We Fight.** When General George C. Marshall enlisted filmmaker Frank Capra to produce the Why We Fight series, he demonstrated that soldiers fight hardest when they understand the stakes.<sup>23</sup> Capra's structure—exposing adversary brutality, affirming allied values, and closing with a call to duty—anchored a generation in purpose.<sup>24</sup> Today's leaders must adapt this model for the information domain: framing operations through verified adversary behavior and allied ideals, grounding them in credible evidence, and concluding with a clear call to service. In an era of cynicism, narrative clarity becomes a combat multiplier.

**Institutional Confidence.** Rituals forge resilience. From the Navy's fouled anchor to the Marine Corps birthday ball, traditions are not pageantry but markers of continuity in a world of constant change. Strategic leaders reinforce this by telling origin stories that connect people to purpose. During his service, Minnich began live-fire range briefings by linking acts of valor to the range's namesake, reminding soldiers they trained within a living tradition. Connecting today's missions to enduring values—understanding the defense of undersea cables, for example, as the modern expression of maritime advantage—reinforces institutional confidence. In a battlespace clouded by deepfakes, that confidence becomes a moral shield.

Talent Magnetism. Generation Z is fluent in transparency and intolerant of hypocrisy. They enlist—and remain—when leadership demonstrates authenticity, growth, and purpose. Commands that succeed in this competition make mentorship visible through open dialogue, provide transparent pathways for advancement, and recognize innovation so that creative problem-solving becomes part of the unit’s identity. When service is framed as a platform for growth, the military can compete for digital-native talent.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, culture sustains retention, and ethos strengthens recruitment.

Ethos, culture, and leadership are not parallel lines but concentric circles. Culture expresses ethos, leadership models it, and the warrior ethos—lived daily—sustains the moral gravity that holds the profession of arms together.

### **Adaptability: Operational Agility (Reach)**

Great-power rivalry now unfolds in milliseconds and terabytes rather than miles and months. In this compressed reality, adaptability is the operational agility required to maneuver faster than the adversary. Precision fires, commercial satellites, and AI-assisted targeting have rendered positional advantage fleeting; leaders who cling to static notions of presence will be outpaced. Those who cultivate adaptability impose surprise rather than absorb it, extending Reach to ensure American influence remains dynamic.

Modernization is less a technological challenge than a cultural one. Raj Shah and Chris Kirchhoff recount in *Unit X* that the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUx) sought “to hack the Pentagon”—to transform the defense enterprise by infusing its “clogged arteries” with the agile DNA of Silicon Valley.<sup>26</sup> Shah’s

2006 combat experience in an F-16 illustrated this reality: frustrated by outdated avionics, he strapped a \$300 commercial GPS to his knee.<sup>27</sup> Its dynamic mapping outperformed the jet's navigation suite, proving that initiative at the edge can—and must—outperform inertia at the center.

**Case in Point: Adaptation as Strategic Logistics.** This ethos of adaptation extended far beyond cockpits and code. From 2010 to 2013, Minnich witnessed it firsthand in Afghanistan, serving as Acting Director of the Security Assistance Office in Kabul and later as Senior Afghan Country Program Director at the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. Under the senior leadership of Ashton Carter—who would later establish DIUx—Minnich's teams executed a multibillion-dollar effort to train, equip, and sustain Afghan forces.

Operating under compressed timelines and shifting requirements, the team frequently adapted procurement pathways to deliver armored vehicles, aircraft, and weapons directly to the front lines. The lesson from the Afghan theater remains relevant for the Indo-Pacific: even the most elegant strategy falters without adaptive systems—and leaders—capable of moving at the speed of operational demand. Without this horizontal agility, the force risks stagnation—falling into the rigid trap of the Bureaucrat.

### *From Presence to Maneuver Posture*

Cold War deterrence rested on visible mass and predictable presence—carrier strike groups loitering off hostile coastlines and armored brigades entrenched along the inner-German frontier. Modern sensors, precision long-range fires, and anti-ship ballistic

missiles have since inverted the risk curve. In the current environment, the static force is the first to suffer.

Advantage now lies not in conspicuous presence but in relentless maneuver, seamless integration, and calculated ambiguity. The predictable model of forward garrisons and routine rotations is giving way to dynamic, networked formations capable of massing effects across domains and dispersing before retaliation arrives. Littoral combat teams reposition fluidly across island chains;<sup>28</sup> expeditionary air bases appear and dismantle in days;<sup>29</sup> and distributed maritime operations extend webs of combat power across entire regions.<sup>30</sup>

The objective is no longer to occupy ground, but to generate dilemmas—saturating, confusing, and overloading the adversary’s decision calculus with a tempo it cannot match and an initiative it cannot reclaim. This is the operational expression of adaptability: a refusal to be a fixed target, choosing instead to operate as a moving, thinking network—difficult to detect, harder to target, and nearly impossible to defeat.

### *Cognitive Agility: Mastering the Deluge*

Without mental velocity, hardware agility becomes irrelevant. Today’s commanders operate in an information battlespace flooded with synthetic-aperture radar feeds, real-time geolocation data, open-source cyber forensics, and continuous full-motion video. In such an environment, advantage belongs not to those who collect the most data, but to those who can distill it into meaning, decide rapidly, and act before the adversary adapts.

Cognitive speed is not accidental; it is engineered. Linear staffing must give way to accelerated analytics: small, cross-functional teams generating actionable options in days rather than weeks. Red teams should be embedded from the outset, challenging assumptions in planning rooms rather than exposing them in execution. Algorithms can surface patterns invisible to the eye, but only experienced commanders can ask the decisive question: “So what?”

Dissent must also be institutionalized. Contrarian briefs, built into the rhythm of decision-making, sharpen judgment, harden plans, and inoculate organizations against groupthink. In the Indo-Pacific, where adversaries seek advantage through confusion and subversion, cognitive agility is the leader’s primary element of combat power. It transforms the overwhelming deluge of data into a stream of strategic opportunity—identified faster, decided sooner, and exploited first.

### *Mission Command at Scale*

Modern conflict compresses decision windows and dissolves traditional front lines. Decisions once reserved for flag officers now fall to junior leaders—not by preference but by necessity. In this environment, delegation is no longer a hallmark of enlightened leadership; it is the baseline condition of distributed warfare.<sup>31</sup>

Digitally resilient networks and AI copilots can flag anomalies, route intelligence, and suggest courses of action, but judgment remains human. The commander’s burden is to convey intent, set boundaries, and absorb risk on behalf of those empowered to act. The connective tissue is not bandwidth but clarity of purpose.

Guidance such as “Disrupt enemy targeting cycles for the next 24 hours. Avoid civilian harm south of Highway 4. Conserve long-range fires for Phase Two” enables synchronized improvisation across domains and time zones. Mission command thrives not through micromanagement but through disciplined freedom rooted in shared understanding.<sup>32</sup>

At the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue, Admiral Samuel J. Paparo Jr., Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, underscored this imperative: “If you want your team to innovate faster, move fast, and break things, you have to assume their risk. You have to eat it.” He warned against “operating at the speed of committee instead of the speed of combat.”<sup>33</sup> Delegation without upward risk ownership paralyzes initiative and traps transformation in bureaucratic inertia.

**Case in Point: Trust as the Decisive Edge.** Isom, as a SEAL Team 6 operator and team leader, saw this ethos tested on every combat deployment. Small teams often operated from remote forward bases, thousands of miles from headquarters. Success depended not on oversight but on trust, shared understanding, and commander’s intent. After-action reviews became truth-seeking forums that prized learning over ego—where rigor and honesty allowed small, elite teams to adapt faster than adversaries. As Isom often remarked, it was culture, not equipment, that gave his task force its edge.

Strategic leadership, then, must cultivate not only speed of decision but sound judgment at every echelon. In an era where algorithmic tempo can exceed human cognition, only trust grounded in shared ethics can sustain the pace required to maneuver, fight, and prevail. With that trust comes responsibility: dispersed units

exercising autonomy must also uphold discipline and moral clarity, ensuring that empowerment never erodes accountability. Without this balance, leaders risk the horizontal failure—the Bureaucrat—or vertical failure—the Rogue.

### **Connection: Strategic Coherence (Reach)**

Strategic leadership in a multi-domain era is less about issuing orders and more about weaving coherence from complexity. Because deterrence is won or lost at the seams between agencies and alliances, leaders must master connection—the strategic reach to bridge institutions, partners, and allies. The most effective leaders do not posture as solitary field marshals; they act as conductors, synchronizing diverse elements into a unified effect.

Connection provides the breadth of the horizontal axis, transforming a collection of disparate partners into an integrated force. Without this connective tissue, the leader remains isolated—capable of movement, perhaps, but lacking the reach required to influence the theater. By mastering connection, the warrior-statesman ensures that the American-led network remains the partner of choice, making alliances not merely convenient but a decisive strategic advantage.

### *Whole-of-Government Integration*

The instruments of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement—too often operate in isolation,<sup>34</sup> divided by statutes, organizational cultures, and budget lines. Strategic leaders must close these seams

by cultivating trust and forging shared intent through embedded interagency teams that plan and execute together.

These structures cannot be one-size-fits-all. Their composition must adapt to regional dynamics and mission demands, producing agile, theater-specific frameworks that integrate diverse authorities while preserving each agency's mandate. Each remains in its lane, but all move toward a shared destination on a common map.

The payoff is measurable. Joint interagency task forces have demonstrated the power of integration for decades. JIATF-South—credited with enabling a majority of drug interdictions in the transit zone—fuses military, intelligence, and law enforcement capabilities into a single, unified effort.<sup>35</sup> JIATF-West performs a parallel role in the Indo-Pacific, coordinating U.S. and partner capabilities to disrupt regional narcotics networks and maritime threats.

Financial and cyber integration have proven equally decisive. The Global Coalition's Counter-ISIS Finance Group demonstrated how synchronized financial measures can reinforce coalition operations, constricting revenue streams even as military campaigns targeted physical networks.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in cyberspace, Cyber Unified Coordination Groups have brought together homeland security, intelligence, and private-sector partners to accelerate mitigation during major incidents such as the SolarWinds breach—preventing the stovepiped responses that adversaries exploit.<sup>37</sup>

Across domains, the principle is constant: the true connective tissue is not hierarchy, but trust—built in advance through transparency, repetition, and professional respect.<sup>38</sup> When trust is present, interagency mechanisms function as responsive networks

rather than rigid bureaucracies, compressing decision timelines and multiplying effects when stakes are highest.

### *Alliance and Partner Diplomacy*

In the Indo-Pacific, security is voluntary. Allies and partners act not out of obligation but from shared interests—interests they must understand and help shape. Strategic leaders must therefore cultivate a cultural fluency grounded in local histories, political rhythms, and each nation’s tolerance for risk. They must also demonstrate shared vulnerability by forward-deploying U.S. assets alongside host-nation forces, signaling that deterrence and consequence are mutual responsibilities.<sup>39</sup>

Minilateral frameworks—such as the Quad or U.S.–Japan–Philippines coast guard patrols—often outperform broader coalitions. These agile, purpose-built partnerships enable rapid cooperation against specific maritime and gray-zone challenges.<sup>40</sup> When partners see their own “fingerprints” on planning, posture, and messaging, they do not merely comply; they commit.

As Patrick Lencioni observes in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, commitment is born not from unanimity, but from clarity and inclusion.<sup>41</sup> Partners need not prevail in every debate; they need to know they are heard and respected. That sense of ownership strengthens solidarity, sharpens deterrence, and transforms alignment into a durable, integrated alliance.

## *Linking Tactics to Strategy*

Deterrence falters when rifle squads, sonar technicians, or cyber operators cannot see how their actions shape the larger campaign. Strategic leaders must close this gap by institutionalizing command narrative cards—concise, unclassified bulletins that connect front-line actions to strategic outcomes.<sup>42</sup>

These cards make purpose tangible at the edge. A UAV team understands that its orbit denies adversaries sanctuary; a patrol recognizes that its presence deters maritime encroachment and reassures local communities; a cyber analyst sees how their forensic report enabled the financial authorities to constrain adversary networks. Repeated across the force, these micro-narratives build shared understanding. They ensure that every action, no matter how routine, contributes to a coherent and purposeful campaign.

Over time, this clarity equips units to improvise with confidence and contest adversary narratives in real time, transforming tactical actions into strategic effects.<sup>43</sup> When every unit understands the strategic “why” behind its “what,” deterrence becomes more than a posture—it becomes a shared enterprise, executed daily across the force.

## *Narrative Ownership*

In the information domain, a single viral clip can unravel months of careful strategic shaping. Leaders must therefore act as first responders in the narrative space, framing events before ambiguity is exploited. Preparation means placing the truth at the fingertips of the force: unclassified imagery, Automatic Identification System

tracks that reveal maritime misconduct, and delegated release authority to trusted officers and noncommissioned officers. Credible responses must move at the speed of events, not the speed of headquarters.

Narrative rehearsal should accompany operational rehearsal. Units must practice what to say if an interdiction is misrepresented, how to present supporting data, and who will speak first. This is not spin; it is disciplined, first-mover truth. By ensuring facts set the tone before falsehoods take hold, strategic leaders protect the legitimacy of the mission and the cohesion of the alliance.

### *Fortifying the Seams*

Even the strongest strategies encounter friction at the seams. Public skepticism can erode civil-military trust when operations fail to produce visible, reliable outcomes. Strategic leaders must counter this by releasing verifiable results, acknowledging setbacks, and connecting missions to tangible benefits—whether reducing piracy, stabilizing fisheries, or accelerating disaster relief.

Alliance fatigue poses a quieter but equally corrosive challenge. Perceptions of unequal burden-sharing weaken solidarity. Deterrence strengthens when U.S. forces visibly share risk, rotate leadership roles,<sup>44</sup> and highlight partner achievements—whether a Philippine Coast Guard interdiction or a Japanese advance in cyber defense.<sup>45</sup>

Information pressures magnify these dynamics. Deepfakes, spoofed signals, and viral rumors can outpace official messaging. Leaders mitigate this by pre-clearing truth release packages—verifiable, pre-approved narratives aligned with strategy—while

empowering communicators at the edge to respond in real time.<sup>46</sup> Owning errors before they are exploited transforms vulnerability into resilience.

Strategic leaders who embody this connective function—integrating the instruments of national power, embedding partners in decision loops, and linking tactical actions to coherent narratives—turn isolated efforts into cumulative advantage. In the Indo-Pacific, where the first indication of crisis may be livestreamed before it is logged by command, this kind of leadership is not optional; it is the decisive variable in whether deterrence holds or falters.

### **Decision: Acting Under Ambiguity (Conduct)**

Strategic leaders operate in an environment saturated with uncertainty—a “fog of peace” where gray-zone campaigns, deepfakes, and layered cyber intrusions blur both attribution and intent. Within this framework, decision is the cognitive speed and moral clarity required to act in the face of ambiguity. It is the “fast hand” on the vertical axis, translating the internal weight of ethos into outward, decisive action.

In this environment, waiting for perfect clarity leads to paralysis, while rushing forward without judgment invites failure. What distinguishes effective leadership is not the possession of flawless information, but disciplined decision—the will to act with clarity of purpose and the foresight to cultivate an organizational metabolism for rapid learning.

**Case in Point: The Antidote to Uncertainty.** Clarity of intent is the antidote to paralysis. A commander who defines success in

unambiguous terms—such as “preserve maritime access without escalation”—gives subordinates the confidence to improvise without drifting from strategic alignment. As General Stanley McChrystal observed in *Team of Teams*, shared consciousness without empowerment breeds frustration, while empowerment without shared purpose breeds chaos.<sup>47</sup>

Minnich witnessed this firsthand under McChrystal in Afghanistan: when the commander’s intent was unmistakable, initiative flourished at every echelon. This clarity must be matched by visible trust. As Captain David Marquet demonstrated aboard a nuclear submarine, shifting authority from the bridge to the crew replaces passive compliance with active ownership.<sup>48</sup> Decision windows now close too quickly for distant headquarters to respond; the leader’s task is to push judgment down the chain so the force can act at the speed of the problem.

**Metabolizing Feedback.** Ambiguity also demands a relentless learning loop. No plan survives contact, but organizations that institutionalize brutally honest after-action reviews convert mistakes into momentum. General Martin Dempsey often reminded the force that the military must be a learning organization—one that metabolizes feedback faster than the problems it faces.<sup>49</sup> Speed without reflection accelerates failure; reflection without speed invites irrelevance.

Ambiguity, then, is not a flaw in the system; it is the system. Strategic leaders who thrive within it act with disciplined audacity—turning confusion into clarity and aligning tactical improvisation with ethical purpose. At the edge, decision is the terminal expression of the warrior ethos.

## *Tempo over Paralysis*

Today's infosphere floods headquarters with uncertainty even as leaders are expected to deliver instant clarity. The result is two persistent pathologies: analysis paralysis, where staffs hoard information in pursuit of perfect clarity that never arrives, and blind momentum, where a leader's internal drive outpaces the strategic alignment of the mission.

Even aggressive leaders can outrun their Reach. At Leyte Gulf, Admiral William "Bull" Halsey pursued a tactical opportunity with characteristic speed and determination, but in doing so temporarily lost alignment with the broader mission to protect the landing force. As Evan Thomas notes, his actions reflected a "firm determination to meet military requirements," even amid incomplete information.<sup>50</sup> The result was not paralysis, but exposure—a reminder that tempo without alignment to Connection carries its own risks.

Strategic leaders break these cycles by imposing decision deadlines and empowering initiative before a crisis strikes. A directive such as "Course of action briefs at 1400, execute by 1800 unless otherwise directed" forces prioritization and movement. Likewise, when communications degrade in a contested littoral environment, junior leaders must possess pre-authorized intent to retask a drone or shadow a vessel. This is the E-A-C-D engine in motion: decision enabling adaptability.

**The Window of Opportunity.** The enduring rule of the edge holds: 70 percent certainty at 80 percent tempo beats 90 percent certainty at zero tempo. General Colin Powell framed this logic

through the “40–70 rule,” arguing that leaders should act once they possess roughly 40 percent of the information required for success, but must not delay beyond 70 percent, lest the window of opportunity close.<sup>51</sup>

General George S. Patton was even blunter: “A good plan violently executed *now* is better than a perfect plan next week.”<sup>52</sup> Together, their counsel underscores a timeless strategic truth: speed and audacity, anchored by a firm ethos and a clear connection to the mission, are themselves instruments of success.

In the high-stakes friction of the Indo-Pacific, the leader who waits for the final 30 percent of information often reaches the right conclusion in a contest already decided.

### *Moral Clarity First*

Tactical brilliance, no matter how dazzling, is meaningless if it undermines strategic success. Too often, operations drift into a state where methods dominate, actions decouple from purpose, and strategy dissolves into activity. The antidote to this drift is moral clarity: a crisis-tested North Star that aligns every operational decision with national intent.

S. L. A. Marshall, drawing on thousands of battlefield interviews during World War II, observed that in moments of chaos, it is not sight or structure but *speech*—clear, purposeful words—that transforms isolated individuals into a unified team. “Speech,” he wrote, “is the beginning of the urge to get something done.” Vague or partial orders invite hesitation and excuse inaction; precise, confirmed understanding unlocks initiative and trust. His warning

remains a fundamental principle: “If there is not time to ensure understanding, there is not time for the maneuver.”<sup>53</sup>

Moral clarity begins with a single, crisp political objective, such as “Preserve Philippine EEZ access without triggering major combat.” That objective serves as a compass that orients decision when complexity clouds the map.

From that aim, authorities and constraints must be back-planned so that rules of engagement, legal reviews, and force posture flow from purpose rather than habit. Leaders must continually ask: Does this action move us closer to the desired political condition? If the answer is “maybe,” tempo is wasted. When moral clarity anchors the force, decentralized execution does not descend into chaos; instead, it converges into coherent strategic action. This is the ultimate expression of Conduct—where the leader’s internal ethos shapes the external direction of the force.

### *Accountability and Feedback*

In high-tempo, ambiguous environments, victory belongs not to the force that moves first, but to the one that learns fastest. Strategic leaders must therefore treat institutional learning as a core warfighting function, not a bureaucratic afterthought.

This shift begins with a culture where candor outranks ceremony. To be effective, after-action reviews must be agenda-free—critiquing decisions rather than egos.<sup>54</sup> Learning must also be rapid: hot washes should occur within twenty-four hours, before memory fades or narratives harden. These lessons must then travel theater-wide, especially the difficult ones. While silence may

protect individual reputations, only transparency protects collective readiness.

Organizations that metabolize feedback this way turn friction into fuel; they rarely repeat the same mistake twice. The fusion of ethics, structure, and speed defines success in the modern battlespace. Frameworks shape reasoning. Moral clarity anchors intent. Feedback accelerates adaptation.

Master these, and a force does not just act faster—it acts smarter, sharper, and with shared purpose. In the end, the advantage shifts decisively. The force that learns fastest keeps moving, while others hesitate.

### **The Cost of Imbalance: Two Strategic Fail States**

When the axes of Conduct and Reach fall out of alignment, the operating logic of leadership breaks down. This imbalance produces two fatal archetypes that court disaster in the modern battlespace: the Bureaucrat and the Rogue. History shows that when these developmental gaps remain unaddressed, the institutional result is often the ultimate form of professional accountability—relief from command.

#### *The Bureaucrat: Reach Without Conduct*

The Bureaucrat represents the failure of Reach to anchor in Conduct. This leader commands vast information, elaborate planning systems, and extensive networks of coordination—but cannot convert preparation into a timely decision. Trapped in a logic loop

of analysis paralysis, they hoard “maybes” in search of perfect certainty while the window of opportunity closes.

**The McClellan Archetype.** During the American Civil War, General George B. McClellan demonstrated a masterclass in Reach—building a formidable system of organization, logistics, and intelligence. He created a meticulously prepared force and possessed the horizontal breadth to sustain it, yet lacked the vertical anchor of Conduct to translate preparation into action.<sup>55</sup> His inability to move from preparation to decision famously prompted President Abraham Lincoln to remark that if General McClellan did not want to use the army, he would “like to borrow it for a day or two.”<sup>56</sup> McClellan’s failure proves that expansive Reach is a hollow asset when a leader lacks the will to decide.

**The Gamelin Warning.** In 1940, General Maurice Gamelin commanded a sophisticated defensive system and a vast multinational coalition—the very definition of high-functioning Reach. Yet he was paralyzed by bureaucratic caution. His strategy successfully integrated British, Belgian, and Dutch forces into a coherent defensive design, but it remained rigid and methodical.<sup>57</sup> When German armor surged through the Ardennes, Gamelin could not adapt. In this fail state, the process of Reach eclipsed the act of Conduct: decision lagged, tempo was lost, and initiative passed irrevocably to the adversary.

### *The Rogue: Conduct Unmoored from Reach*

The Rogue represents the opposite failure: Conduct unmoored from Reach. This leader possesses fierce conviction and decisive energy but lacks the connective discipline of alliance and strategic

alignment. Detached from the broader mission, their decisiveness becomes a strategic liability, producing a blind momentum.

**The MacArthur Example.** General Douglas MacArthur’s warrior ethos and audacity at Inchon represented the heights of Conduct.<sup>58</sup> However, his subsequent loss of Reach—publicly challenging civilian authority and advocating escalation beyond Korea—produced a catastrophic misalignment. As Richard Neustadt observed, while Washington and its allies sought to limit the war and avoid global escalation, MacArthur pressed to expand it.<sup>59</sup> Unrestrained by strategic alignment, he substituted personal conviction for unity of effort, precipitating a rupture with civilian leadership that culminated in his relief from command.

**The Kornilov Coup.** General Lavr Kornilov represents the most extreme manifestation of the Rogue—a leader whose conviction severs alignment with civilian authority. In August 1917, amid the instability of the Russian Provisional Government, Kornilov possessed a formidable vertical anchor of Conduct. A decorated war hero with a reputation for decisive action, he was widely respected within the officer corps.

However, Kornilov’s Reach collapsed into systemic rupture. Supported by Deputy War Minister Boris Savinkov—who, as Alexander Kerensky recounts, pursued a “personal line of politics” to bypass established authority—Kornilov directed forces toward Petrograd in a direct challenge to the government he served.<sup>60</sup> By substituting personal judgment for constitutional authority, he severed the essential Connection between military power and political purpose. His actions did not stabilize the state; instead, they triggered a civil-military fracture that accelerated the government’s

collapse. Kornilov stands as a stark warning: when Conduct becomes unmoored from the Reach of political legitimacy, even the most decisive action can undermine the very system it seeks to defend.

*The E-A-C-D Engine: Synthesis at the Crosshairs*

The profession of arms in a multi-domain era demands more than tactical proficiency; it requires the deliberate calibration of character and capability. To avoid the inertia of the bureaucrat and the isolation of the rogue, leaders must master the four elements that power the E-A-C-D engine.

When aligned, these elements function as a strategic compass—guiding the leader toward a state of strategic resonance:

- **Ethos (The Anchor):** Provides the moral foundation—the internal stability required to withstand ambiguity.
- **Adaptability (The Engine):** Drives the speed and agility required to outpace the adversary.
- **Connection (The Bridge):** Links forces, partners, and institutions into a coherent whole.
- **Decision (The Trigger):** Translates intent into action—timely, disciplined judgment at the point of friction.

By balancing the internal anchor of the vertical axis with the outward reach of the horizontal, leaders remain steady at the center of the crosshairs. As shown in Figure 12.1, this intersection represents the sweet spot of modern command—the state of

strategic resonance where moral clarity meets operational speed, and where strategy is ultimately decided.

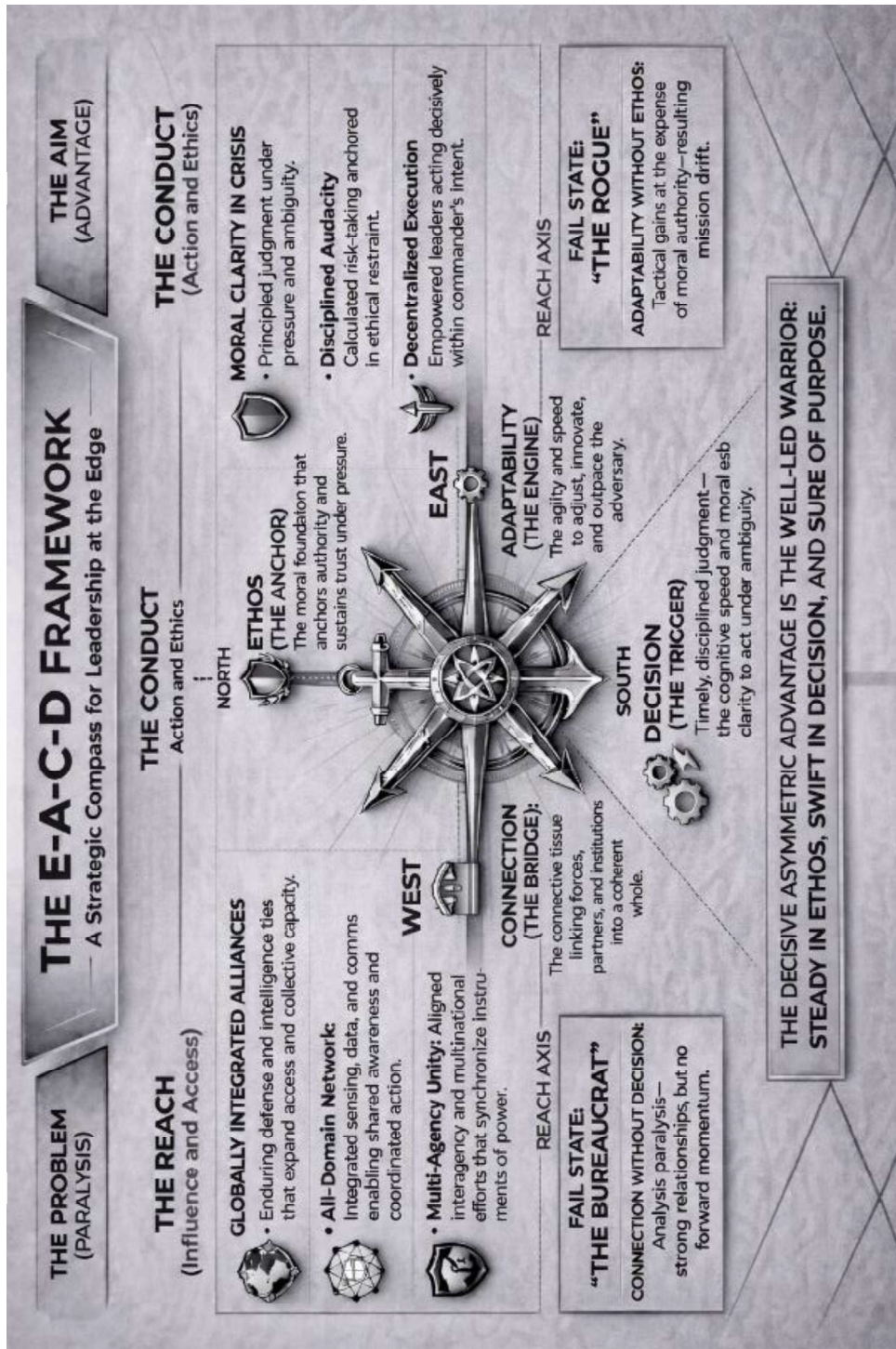


Figure 12.1 The E-A-C-D Strategic Leadership Model  
Source: James M. Minnich

In the high-velocity friction of the Indo-Pacific, this integrated approach to leadership is the ultimate weapon system. It ensures that when the “fog of peace” clears, the American-led network is not merely present, but prepared to prevail at the decisive moment.

### **Forging the Strategic Edge: The Four-Corner Foundation**

If the E-A-C-D engine defines how leaders operate, the Four-Corner Foundation defines how they are built. These corners provide the structural base upon which the axes of leadership are secured. Together, they form the institutional engine that transforms potential into performance:

- **The Conduct (The Vertical Axis):** Comprising Ethos and Decision, this axis defines the leader’s internal moral spine. It is anchored through the foundations of human judgment at machine speed and reflective leadership, ensuring that even at high velocity, action is governed by moral clarity.
- **The Reach (The Horizontal Axis):** Comprising Adaptability and Connection, this axis defines the leader’s external influence. It is widened through cross-domain literacy and cultural and linguistic competence, enabling the leader to bridge institutional gaps and outpace the adversary’s narrative.

True leadership at the edge occurs at the intersection of these axes. It is here, at the center of the crosshairs, that maximum influence meets absolute integrity. The development of this integrity begins with the moral and cognitive training required for Conduct. Without the vertical anchor of the spine, the horizontal reach of the

force becomes aimless; with it, tactical actions become strategic milestones.

*Corner 1: Human Judgment at Machine Speed (Conduct)*

Ethical judgment anchors Decision when machines compress time. In an “AI-first fighting force,”<sup>61</sup> tempo becomes as decisive as mass or maneuver. As AI-enabled systems shorten decision cycles—from strike authorization to information operations—leaders will confront dilemmas at speeds that test the limits of human clarity.

What if an autonomous targeting model recommends lethal action with only 63 percent confidence? When does synthetic media shift from countering adversary propaganda to eroding our own credibility? These are not technical glitches; they are command judgments with campaign-level consequences. As General Dan Caine, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed, the Joint Force needs the “creative, innovative, and diabolical minds” to field these capabilities—but the responsibility for their employment remains squarely with the commander.<sup>62</sup>

The Department’s AI strategy emphasizes speed, model parity, and the removal of institutional friction to sustain competitive advantage.<sup>63</sup> Yet the faster the machine, the heavier the commander’s burden. Responsibility cannot be delegated to code or diffused through algorithmic opacity. In an AI-enabled force, human judgment is the decisive asymmetric advantage. Adversaries who outsource their “soul” to machines may move fast, but only disciplined Decision ensures that speed produces strategic strength rather than ethical liability.

Professional Military Education (PME) must therefore operationalize ethical fluency. PME should integrate AI-enabled decision games, compressed-time simulations, and command-level exercises that force leaders to navigate uncertainty under extreme pressure.<sup>64</sup> Promotion systems must reward demonstrated judgment in technologically mediated environments—not merely technical literacy. In the end, judgment at machine speed reflects the warrior’s covenant: the machine may deliver speed, but the human must provide the purpose.

### *Corner 2: Reflective and Resilient Leadership (Conduct)*

Reflective practice and resilient leadership provide the ballast for a leader’s Ethos, turning raw experience into strategic foresight. In an era of accelerated complexity, reflection is not a luxury—it is an operational necessity. Leaders who rehearse uncertainty before it strikes develop the mental muscle memory, steady composure, and endurance required to remain vertical when the environment attempts to push them off course.

Reflection is the engine of judgment. Through journaling,<sup>65</sup> red-teaming, and the disciplined study of historical failure, leaders pressure-test their Decision and Ethos before confronting reality. This scenario-based cognitive rehearsal allows a commander to metabolize the “shock of the new” in a controlled environment,<sup>66</sup> ensuring that the first time they encounter a crisis is not the first time they have thought through its moral and tactical implications.

However, reflection without resilience is brittle. While reflection prepares the mind, resilience fortifies the will. This cornerstone must be cultivated through stress inoculation—placing

leaders in high-friction environments where they must exercise Conduct while physically and cognitively exhausted. Resilience is not merely the ability to “bounce back”; it is the character-driven endurance to remain present and purposeful in the middle of the storm. As former Navy SEAL Eric Greitens observes, “we cannot bounce back...there is only moving through.”<sup>67</sup> Resilient leaders do not return unchanged from adversity; they integrate hardship into their character, transforming experience into strength.

PME must normalize guided reflection and structured peer feedback alongside rigorous, high-stakes simulations. When reflection becomes habit and resilience becomes instinct, leaders are equipped with the steady hand required to thrive amid the friction of modern conflict.

### *Corner 3: Cross-Domain Literacy (Reach)*

Cross-domain literacy is the engine of Adaptability. It provides the fluency to plan and act across space, cyber, and informational domains before tactical crises converge. As General Caine emphasized, the Joint Force must ensure warfighters have “the right combat capability with the right capacity, at the time that commanders in the field are contemplating plans and activities—not at the point of crisis or conflict.”<sup>68</sup>

Building this literacy requires immersion, not mere awareness. The Department should establish multi-month fellowships for mid-career officers and senior noncommissioned officers at cyber commands, intelligence fusion cells, financial regulatory bodies, and commercial technology incubators. Weighting these tours

toward Joint PME and promotion would transform leaders from domain specialists into strategic integrators.<sup>69</sup>

This corner equips the force to anticipate convergence of technology, economics, and national security. A leader who understands how cyber intrusions into a regional power grid correlate with shifts in maritime insurance rates can outmaneuver an adversary in the gray zone. By mastering cross-domain literacy, leaders extend the horizontal axis of the Reach, enabling them to adapt to non-kinetic threats at the same speed and precision as they would on the physical battlefield.

#### *Corner 4: Cultural and Linguistic Competence (Reach)*

Cultural and linguistic competence sustains Connection—the trust and shared understanding that make alliances durable. It ensures that the Reach of American leadership is built on mutual ownership rather than mere compliance. In the Indo-Pacific’s diverse and contested strategic environment, the ability to communicate across barriers is not a decorative addition to a résumé; it is a force multiplier.

Language is the primary gatekeeper of trust. While mastery is a career-long pursuit, even functional linguistic competence allows leaders to move beyond transactional exchanges and build genuine rapport. Yet language alone is insufficient.<sup>70</sup> True competence requires the ability to navigate the underlying social and political structures of a partner nation. Foreign Area Officers—the gold standard of regional expertise—must be more fully integrated into operational planning and theater strategy.<sup>71</sup>

As General Caine reinforced, the Department must remain “globally integrated” with allies; that integration is degraded if the force remains linguistically and culturally isolated.<sup>72</sup> Meeting this challenge requires leveraging technology to scale human talent. Culturally informed AI tutors and adaptive language-training platforms should be expanded to provide just-in-time linguistic competence across the force.

PME must reward regional expertise—not as enrichment, but as essential preparation for Connection. Done well, these investments ensure that the American warrior remains the partner of choice, capable of bridging the gap between intent and execution across contested theaters.

### *A Blueprint for Future-Ready Leadership*

Together, these four corners translate leadership at the edge from aspiration into an institutional system. Human judgment at machine speed and reflective and resilient leadership fortify The Conduct—the vertical axis of leadership—instilling the Ethos and disciplined Decision required to navigate the modern battlespace. Simultaneously, cross-domain literacy and cultural and linguistic competence expand The Reach—the horizontal axis—cultivating warriors capable of broad-spectrum Adaptability and trusted Connection across regions, domains, and alliances.

This shift moves the profession of arms beyond reacting to crises toward deliberately cultivating the architects of the Indo-Pacific century. In an era defined by machine speed, the disciplined human mind—operating at the intersection of The Conduct and The Reach—remains the decisive asymmetric advantage.

By anchoring integrity and expanding influence, the E-A-C-D leader ensures that even in a contested and automated future, the American warrior remains master of the mission. The crosshairs are set: the engine is primed. Leadership at the edge is no longer a choice—it is the standard.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Warrior-Statesmanship for the Indo-Pacific Century**

History affirms what doctrine demands: adaptability is not improvisation. It is disciplined responsiveness—earned through preparation, anchored in clarity of mission, enacted through trust, and refined by judgment under pressure.

Past wars offer enduring proof. At Midway in 1942, Admiral Raymond Spruance demonstrated that Adaptability is not mere reaction, but the ability to seize tempo under crushing uncertainty—calculating risk and striking with disciplined audacity at the decisive moment. As Parshall and Tully observe, the true consequences of Midway lay not in ships sunk, but in the shift of strategic initiative—the capacity to concentrate force and dictate the tempo of future operations.<sup>73</sup>

In 1951, General Matthew Ridgway restored momentum in Korea not by rewriting strategy, but by reestablishing leadership at the point of friction.<sup>74</sup> By moving his command forward and insisting that subordinate commanders do the same, he rebuilt morale and coherence—demonstrating that Conduct can reclaim the initiative even amid uncertainty.<sup>75</sup> Ridgway showed that when a leader restores the internal anchor of presence and purpose, they can

steady a drifting organization and prepare it to meet the adversary's tempo.

Decades later in Iraq, General David Petraeus—under whom Minnich twice served—demonstrated that operations, narrative, and governance must move as one. This integration ensures that every tactical Decision advances strategic coherence, reflecting a command approach that balances expanded Reach across domains.<sup>76</sup>

The lesson endures: platforms may shape tempo, and algorithms may compress decision cycles, but only leaders of character forge the trust and Connection that sustain Adaptability.

### *The Asymmetric Edge*

Today's environment of competitive multipolarity and compressed warning windows magnifies the premium on leadership. The fundamentals remain unchanged—character, competence, and commitment—but they must now be fused with cross-domain fluency and alliance empathy. Strategic leaders must connect space telemetry with littoral patrols and financial sanctions within a single decision loop—and make allies co-owners of risk through Connection rather than passive recipients of reassurance.

What America now requires is a generation of leaders who refuse the false choice between character and capability, operating instead at the decisive intersection of both:

- **Architects of Trusted Alliances:** Who expand Reach to bridge sovereign seams, using Conduct to provide the reliable, principled leadership that transforms distant partners into committed co-owners of shared risk.

- **Guardians of the Ethical Edge:** Who leverages the velocity of Reach to master AI and cross-domain complexity, while ensuring every Decision is governed by a moral spine—preserving the covenant between the warrior and the citizenry even at machine speed.

Weapons may deter, and networks may accelerate, but the decisive asymmetric advantage remains the well-led warrior—steady in Ethos, swift in Decision, and sure of purpose. Preserve that edge, and the Indo-Pacific will remain a region where nations chart their own course. Lose it, and no quantum sensor or hypersonic glide vehicle will recover the moral gravity that holds coalitions—and outcomes—together.

The charge is clear: earn the trident, the tab, the wings, or the uniform—every day—by leading with integrity across domains, cultures, and crises. Do this, and America’s strategic edge will not merely endure; it will sharpen—anchored in Ethos, empowered by Adaptability, linked through Connection, and guided by disciplined Decision.

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