**Unpacking Military Emulation:**

**Absorptive Capacity and German Counterinsurgency Doctrine during ISAF**

*Which organisational activities promote effective military emulation? Which variables facilitate and impede the emergence of these activities? Drawing upon the academic literatures on military change and management studies, as well as semi-structured interviews within the British and German militaries, this article identifies five key organisational activities which promote effective inter-organisational doctrinal learning. In doing so, the article improves understanding of the contribution that management studies can make to multi-disciplinary scholarship on military learning. The article examines the variables which facilitate the emergence of activities which support effective inter-organisational doctrinal learning through a case study of Bundeswehr doctrinal absorptive capacity during ISAF. It also explores the impact of these activities on doctrine development. The article demonstrates the crucial importance of active and well-informed civilian oversight of the activities which support military learning.*

Keywords: absorptive capacity; counterinsurgency; German military; inter-organisational learning; military emulation; military learning.

**The Importance of Exploring Doctrinal Absorptive Capacity**

The post-Cold War era has witnessed a rapid expansion of efforts by militaries, especially within NATO, to improve intra- and inter-organisational learning through formal learning processes and the wider application of organisational learning principles (Dyson 2019b; Foley, Griffin and McCartney 2011; Interview 3; Marcus 2019). However, the field of military studies has been slow to engage with the conceptual and theoretical challenges of inter-organisational learning in a military context. Crucially, it has not yet taken full advantage of its multi-disciplinarity, especially the potential contributions of management studies and organisation studies (Griffin 2017, p.217).[[1]](#endnote-1)

The literature on the sources of military change provides important insights about structural barriers to learning. But it does not explore the contribution that management studies and organisation studies can provide to understanding the organisational activities which support effective military learning. The scholarship examining ‘bottom-up’ military adaptation and learning that does engage with these issues, focuses largely upon intra-organisational learning.[[2]](#endnote-2) Little attention has been paid to developing understanding of the activities which enable militaries to acquire and absorb knowledge from allied militaries and other relevant external organisations (Coticchia and Moro 2016, pp.701-702).

This neglect of the mechanisms of inter-organisational military learning is surprising. The academic literature on organisational learning demonstrates that they not only help to foster effective emulation, but also innovation.[[3]](#endnote-3) Organisational learning is characterised by tension between knowledge exploitation (establishing routines by using existing organisational knowledge) and knowledge exploration (generating greater knowledge diversity through experimentation) (Holmqvist 2003, p.99). The capacity to undertake intra-organisational learning is an important attribute for an organisation. But it is more likely to promote knowledge exploitation and reinforce existing routines if not accompanied by a strong inter-organisational learning capability which fosters knowledge exploration (Cohen and Levinthal 1989; Holmqvist 2003, p.99; Sheremata 2000, p.396). Input from respected outsiders, such as officers from allied/friendly militaries, academia and partners in the Comprehensive Approach, provides valuable disruptive thought which can generate new ideas about tactical and operational-level activity (Foley 2014, p.297; Nonanka 2013, p.22).

Hence this article make two contributions to understanding military emulation. First, it examines the activities and processes which promote effective inter-organisational military learning in doctrine. There are very good reasons to focus on doctrine. Doctrine is an essential foundation for developing common understanding about operational concepts and for critical reflection about operational design, training and tactical-level decision-making (Høiback, 2016 p.192). Where militaries fail to codify learning as tactical- or operational-level doctrine and use informal mechanisms to transfer group learning, it leads to ‘organisational forgetting’, forcing soldiers to relearn lessons on deployment in ongoing or future conflicts, sometimes at great cost (Catignani 2014 pp.41-42). Furthermore, officers are less likely to consult doctrine if it is not perceived as up-to-date for contemporary operations (Harvey and Wilkinson 2009). The ability to undertake effective inter-organisational learning in doctrine[[4]](#endnote-4) is, therefore, a key dimension of military effectiveness.[[5]](#endnote-5) The article’s second contribution is to explore the relationship between the structural barriers to learning, identified by scholarship on the sources of military change, and the activities and processes, identified by management studies, which encourage inter-organisational learning. It examines, in particular, the circumstances which determine the emergence and effectiveness of these activities and processes.

Hence the article begins, after outlining its research methods, by identifying the main organisational activities and processes which are prerequisites for militaries to effectively identify, absorb and assimilate knowledge from external organisations about doctrine (doctrinal ‘absorptive capacity’) (Cohen and Levinthal 1989, pp.569-570; Coticchia and Moro 2016, pp.701-702).[[6]](#endnote-6) The article then explores the circumstances in which doctrinal absorptive capacity emerges. It does so through a case study of the development of German Army absorptive capacity and its impact on inter-organisational learning about counter-insurgency doctrine during *Bundeswehr* deployment in NATO’s International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF). The case study examines the impact of a range of variables upon the emergence of effective doctrinal inter-organisational learning architecture, including the insights of bureaucratic politics, organisational culture, organisational politics, realism and strategic culture. It uncovers a mutually-constitutive relationship between the variables identified by these approaches and absorptive capacity: they at once affect and are affected by absorptive capacity.

Two variables external to the military emerge as crucial pre-requisites for improvement in doctrinal absorptive capacity: the presence of a strategic culture open to the adoption of doctrinal best-practice and the threat of defeat. However, the case study finds that these variables alone are insufficient to spur improved absorptive capacity. Without active and well-informed civilian oversight of absorptive capacity, variables internal to military organisations captured by bureaucratic politics, organisational culture and organisational politics remain potent obstacles to improvement in inter-organisational learning capability. The article concludes by reflecting upon its findings and avenues for future research on inter-organisational military learning.

**Research Methods**

The identification of the organisational activities supporting absorptive capacity was achieved through analysis of the academic literatures on military change and management studies. A practitioner perspective was obtained via semi-structured interviews with civilian personnel and officers from the British and German militaries. The British military was selected to complement interviews within the *Bundeswehr* due to the UK’s status as a pioneer in the development of formal learning processes (Foley, Griffin and McCartney 2011). Interviews were conducted in 2016 and 2017 with personnel working at key Army, joint and ministerial organisations comprising the ‘intellectual architecture’ and lessons-learned organisations of the two armed forces. Within the British military, interview partners consisted of eleven civilian and military personnel from the Army Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research (CHACR), Army Lessons Team, Joint Forces Command (JFC) Joint Warfare Operational Analysis and Learning Team, Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC) and the Ministry of Defence Chilcot Implementation Team.

Perspectives about the activities supporting inter-organisational learning and development and performance of *Bundeswehr* absorptive capacity were sought from 23 German officers in Army, Joint and Ministerial-level organisations associated with learning and doctrine during ISAF (Table 1). Interviewees included personnel from the Army Lessons-Learned Branch, Army Training Command, *Bundeswehr* Centre for Military History and the Social Sciences, *Bundeswehr* Office for Defence Planning, Federal Defence Ministry’s (BMVg) Department for Strategy and Deployment, Leadership Academy, Office for Army Development, Operations Command and Working Group on Joint and Combined Operations. Former company commanders and lessons-learned staff officers deployed during different stages of ISAF were also consulted. Interviewees were, therefore, diverse in length of service and operational experience.

**Absorptive Capacity and Inter-organisational Learning**

Management studies has devoted substantial attention to the antecedents of inter-organisational knowledge transfer. It focuses on the impact of contingent factors, especially knowledge ambiguity[[7]](#endnote-7) and the structural, relational and cognitive aspects of inter-organisational social networks.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, management studies research on absorptive capacity also provides important insights into how agency can be exerted over inter-organisational learning via improvements to absorptive capacity (van Wijk, Jansen and Lyles 2009, p.834)*.*

Absorptive capacity has two dimensions: potential absorptive capacity (PACAP) and realised absorptive capacity (RACAP). PACAP refers to the capacity to acquire knowledge, to use IT hardware and software to effectively manage knowledge, and to create communication channels which disseminate learning (Zahra and George 2002, p.190). RACAP refers to the ability to build upon PACAP and achieve knowledge transformation: “…to develop and refine the routines that facilitate combining existing knowledge and the newly acquired and assimilated knowledge” (Zahra and George 2002, p.190). The creation of a culture of experimentation and creativity within an organisation is central to RACAP, as it ensures a healthy balance between knowledge exploitation and experimentation (de Holan and Phillips 2004, pp.1603-1613; de Long and Fahey 2000, p.125; Nagl 2002, p.129; Weber 2007, p.336).

*The Key Components of PACAP and RACAP in Doctrine Development*

The academic literatures on absorptive capacity and military change suggests that PACAP and RACAP in inter-organisational learning about doctrine are enabled by five key organisational activities. First, the presence of allied military liaison officers, who enhance inter-organisational knowledge acquisition and knowledge transformation. Their embedding in sufficient numbers within different branches and commands, including doctrine development, forms a vital conduit for specialised knowledge from alliance partners (Inkpen 1998, pp.74-75). They play an important role in providing access to expertise which can reduce knowledge ambiguity and enhance the relational dimensions of social networks by increasing the volume of professional social interaction. Furthermore, they are essential in facilitating visits with alliance partner counterparts, which helps to build mutual trust, reduce cultural distance and improve PACAP (Inkpen 1998, pp.74-75). Crucially, liaison officers offer a vital opportunity to expose intra-organisational learning to outside perspectives.

The second key feature of inter-organisational learning best-practice in doctrine is a lively intellectual architecture, which has five dimensions. First, the presence of ‘incubators’: informal study groups/working groups within the Army or wider military (Jensen 2016, pp.213-30; Marcus 2019, p.7). They form a key dimension of RACAP by creating a forum where officers have the time and intellectual autonomy to reflect critically upon doctrine. Formalised doctrinal think-tanks within the organisational hierarchy form a second important venue for knowledge experimentation. They often host liaison officers and are an institutional node for outreach to alliance partner warfare development centres, NGOs, other government departments (OGDs), international organisations and universities (Interview 4).

The third key dimension of intellectual architecture is the presence of military history and social science research institutes, which form a conduit for international academic research (Kiszely 2013, p.129; Fitzgerald 2013, p.12). However, concrete steps must be taken to facilitate academic freedom. Crucially, a majority of scholars should have the status of civilian personnel with long-term contracts, which will reduce pressure to exploit existing organisational knowledge (Interview 4).

Fourth, a military’s intellectual architecture is enhanced by the presence of military-wide professional publications allowing critical debate about tactical- and operational-level challenges (Foley, Griffin and McCartney 2011, pp. 267-268; Mackay 2013, p.261). Such publications should be publicly-accessible and permit contributions from relevant external individuals and organisations, for example, liaison officers, academics, NGOs and OGDs (Foley, Griffin and McCartney 2011, pp.267-68; Little 2009, pp.15-16). Editorial teams should be drawn from the military’s intellectual architecture and also include external academics (Kiszely 2013, p.129). Finally, officer education forms a central pillar of a military’s intellectual architecture. It is vital that education exposes officers to inter-organisational learning and develops critical thinking abilities. Hence curriculum development at military academies should include the input of personnel from the military’s wider intellectual architecture and external academics (Interview 5).

The third fundamental organisational activity enabling doctrinal absorptive capacity is the establishment of a formal lessons-learned process (Marcus 2019, p.8). While lessons-learned processes focus predominantly on intra-organisational learning, they can also facilitate inter-organisational knowledge acquisition. A substantial proportion of individual/group learning during multinational operations derives from interaction with allies (Interview 6). Creating the capacity to uncover this learning through knowledge acquisition tools, such as the deployment of lessons-learned staff officers (LLSO), post-operational reports from different command levels and workshops with returning contingents, is crucial (Byrne and Bannister 2013, pp.77-78; Interviews 1, 7, 26; Weber 2007, pp.336-337).

Furthermore, lessons-learned processes enjoy a privileged position in important transnational social networks of knowledge transfer, especially NATO’s Joint Analysis and Lessons-Learned Centre (JALLC), which is responsible for analysing NATO operations, training and exercises, disseminating joint lessons and organisational learning best-practice (Coticchia and Moro 2016, pp.710-712). Lessons-learned also enhance PACAP by improving knowledge management hardware and software and knowledge dissemination capability (Byrne and Bannister 2013, pp.77-78; Dyson 2019a; Dyson 2019b; Weber 2007, pp.336-337). Moreover, lessons-learned processes can contribute to RACAP by helping to foster a wider organisational culture of experimentation and creativity.

However, the institutional design of a lessons-learned process is decisive in determining its effectiveness (Piening 2013, p.229). Most important is the establishment of a cross-functional team, which endorses the analysis of lessons identified from operations, identifies and tasks individuals/organisations with responsibility for following-up lessons identified and holds them to account (Piening 2013, p.229). For a cross-functional team to exert influence it needs to meet regularly and possess three structural factors: control over scarce resources, centrality in information networks and authority within the organisational hierarchy (Interviews 1, 2, 26; Sheremata 2000, p.400).

The membership of the cross-functional team is especially important in establishing its authority. Without the military leadership’s support lessons identified will likely ‘stall’ during implementation (NATO LL Handbook, 2016, p.34). In addition, the senior leadership’s support endows lessons with greater credibility and legitimacy, hence the team should include senior personnel from key functional areas (Downie 1988, p.263; Interviews 1, 2, 26; Lis 2014, pp. 70-71). Furthermore, where relevant, a cross-functional team should include academics and NGO/OGD representatives. Army-level cross-functional teams should also include joint level lessons-learned personnel and senior officers from other services to provide critical perspectives and promote lesson cross-fertilisation (Interview 8).

The fourth key organisational feature supporting inter-organisational doctrinal learning is a flexible and decentralised leadership style, which is an important means for larger and older institutions to overcome resistance to change (Marcus 2019, p.7). Delegating decision-making authority to lower organisational levels permits decisions to be taken at a level where there is greatest knowledge about problems (Harkness and Hunzeker 2015, pp.77-80; Sheremata 2000, p.395). Furthermore, command levels closer to personnel encountering a problem are better-placed to motivate experimentation and creativity, due to their stronger social relations (DiBella 2010, 121; Russell 2010, pp.200-01; Serena 2011, p.172). Consequently, the principle of mission command is an important enabler of PACAP and RACAP (Marcus 2019, p.7). It involves granting tactical-level personnel significant decisional autonomy, which they should exercise while remaining true to their commander’s intent. Mission command provides officers with opportunities to experiment with new approaches, including ideas derived from interaction with allies.

The final key organisational feature promoting doctrinal absorptive capacity is the establishment of a working environment where individuals do not fear creative behaviour and the risk-taking that it necessitates. Hence opportunities should be provided for commanders to experiment, especially in education and training (Interview 4). Furthermore, creative behaviour by individuals, including inter-organisational knowledge transfer, should be rewarded by a military’s promotion framework (Byrne and Bannister 2013, p.83-84; Edmonson 1999, p.351; Lis 2012 p.25).

**The Sources of Absorptive Capacity**

The academic literature on organisational learning has neglected the role of power and political processes in undermining the willingness of organisational hierarchies to promote absorptive capacity (Easterby-Smith and Lyles 2011; Lawrence 2005). This gap can be effectively addressed by political science and international relations scholarship on the sources of military change. This literature is characterised by four main approaches: neorealism, cultural approaches, bureaucratic politics and organisational politics, all of which have much to say about emulation.

Neorealism provides a potentially powerful framework for understanding the drivers of improvement in the content and activities of inter-organisational learning. It argues that willingness to emulate is the result of threat intensity: when a military faces a threatening security environment, especially the threat of defeat, it will be more open to external ideas and improvement in absorptive capacity (Waltz 1979, p.127). However, history is replete with examples of militaries which have failed to adopt basic principles of best-practice in the content and activities of learning, despite compelling pressures from their security environment.

A variety of domestic-level variables can stymie improvement in the content and mechanisms of emulation. First, the literature on military change highlights the impact of cultural factors exogenous and endogenous to the military. Strategic culture emphasises the importance of societally-embedded norms concerning the use of force as a tool of foreign policy, civil-military relations and the role of the military professional (Bloomfield 2012). These norms set boundaries about the kind of learning deemed acceptable by society and the military’s political leadership. Where learning processes generate, or threaten to generate, learning at odds with these norms, they will likely fail, or remain stunted.

Organisational culture also provides useful insights about the impact of cultural practices of military organisations on absorptive capacity (Catignani 2014; Davidson 2011; de Long and Fahey 2000, pp.117-18; Kier, 1995). It is defined by Kier (1995, pp.69-70) as ‘the set of basic assumptions and values that shape shared understandings, and the forms or practices whereby these meanings are expressed, affirmed or communicated to the members of an organization’. While strategic culture and a military’s organisational culture can overlap, the concept provides a useful means to conceptualise ‘bottom-up’ cultural change resulting from intra- and inter-organisational learning. This learning can sometimes clash with wider, societally-embedded understandings of the role of the military professional, or of civil-military relations in defence planning. In addition, it offers a means to accommodate the impact of competing professional role conceptions within, or between services, on the willingness of a military to improve absorptive capacity.

Cultural approaches also provide an alternative vision of the nature of systemic variables. In contrast to neorealism’s focus on threat as a driver of change in the content and mechanisms of learning, Farrell (2001; 2005) argues that learning is a result of states conforming to transnational norms of military professionalism deriving from transnational military networks. Change is dependent upon the level of embeddedness of domestic norms[[9]](#endnote-9), though their ‘stickiness’ can be overcome through a combination of a perception of crisis, the role of normative entrepreneurs within and outside the military, and personnel change (Farrell 2001, pp.81-4; Farrell 2005, pp.460-61).

The bureaucratic politics approach is pessimistic about the propensity of military organisations to encourage absorptive capacity. It draws our attention to the challenge that learning poses to vested interests, especially the budget-share and autonomy of service branches, or sub-organisations within the services (Farrell and Terriff 2010, p.9; Grissom 2006, pp.910-13). The approach suggests that absorptive capacity depends upon the extent to which senior officers perceive the learning it generates to be conducive to the budget-share and autonomy of their organisation.

Finally, organisational politics argues that organisations which have to undertake highly-complex tasks and coordinate the activities of a large number of individuals develop standard operating procedures privileging the status quo (Allison 1971, pp.67-68; Posen 1984). The tendency of militaries to turn to established practices is enhanced by the chaos and danger of the battlefield (Hasselbladh and Ydén 2019, p.8). Organisational politics also draws attention to the impact of socio-psychological factors: perceptions of personal reputational damage that can result from knowledge transfer (Posen 1984, p.42). It suggests that a military’s tendency to seek out inter-organisational learning is determined by the threat of defeat, the presence of opportunities for the military, or a service, to bolster its resources/influence, and finally, civilian intervention (Davidson 2011, pp.12-13; Posen 1984, p.42).

In sum, the above approaches posit that absorptive capacity is dependent upon structural variables. They view the organisational activities and processes which underpin inter-organisational learning as of little consequence for the propensity of militaries to emulate effectively. However, as the academic literature on management studies highlights, absorptive capacity is not simply dependent upon the conditions set by structural variables. Rather, they exist in a mutually-constitutive relationship with absorptive capacity, which at once affects, and is affected by, these variables (Chen, Lin and Ching-Hsun 2009, pp.152-158; Davidson 2011, p.192; Marcus 2015).

Structural variables undoubtedly exert a vital impact on the propensity of military organisations to improve absorptive capacity. Yet, as the organisational activities and processes which support PACAP and RACAP emerge, they can reduce the corrupting effects of structural variables on military learning. The scholarship of Chen et al (2009), Davidson (2011) and Marcus (2015) highlights how further ‘bottom-up’ improvements to absorptive capacity can emerge as a military becomes more competent at individual, group and organisational learning. The following section examines this mutually-constitutive relationship through a case study of German absorptive capacity during ISAF and its impact on counterinsurgency doctrine development.

**German Counterinsurgency Doctrine: The Failure to Undertake Timely and Effective Inter-organisational Learning during ISAF**

German counterinsurgency doctrine forms a fertile case study of inter-organisational learning, as its development lagged well-behind operational challenges and doctrinal best-practice. Upon the inception of *Bundeswehr* operations in Afghanistan in 2002, the Army did not have counterinsurgency doctrine (Sangar 2014, pp.201-203). Army doctrine, Heeresdienstvorschrift (H.Dv.) 100/100, was updated in 2005 to include a section on operations against irregular forces. But it focused on the kinetic dimensions of stabilisation and provided little detail on delivering non-kinetic activities in an insecure environment (Noetzel 2010, pp.497-98; Schreer 2010, 104; Sangar 2014, pp.201-203).

This doctrinal gap was highly-problematic. Germany had taken control of ISAF Regional Command North in 2003, which from 2006 was characterised by growing insurgency (Sangar 2015, p.421). German forces began to face the threat of defeat, which would not only have important negative implications for ISAF’s ability to stabilise Afghanistan, but also for Germany’s reputation as an alliance partner (Interviews 9, 23; Noetzel, 2010; Noetzel 2011). Yet, only in March 2013, months before the end of German combat operations, was a counterinsurgency guide for commanders released.

At face value, the guide dovetails with counterinsurgency best-practice by adopting a population-centric approach placing the local population’s security at its core and separating counterinsurgency into three tasks: shape, secure and develop (COIN Guide 2013, pp.22-23). However, it expresses limited commitment to delivering non-kinetic dimensions of counterinsurgency (COIN Guide 2013, pp.14-15). In contrast, upon the inception of British operations in Afghanistan in 2001 British Army counterinsurgency doctrine was fit-for-purpose and emphasised the importance of delivering both kinetic and non-kinetic effects in support of population-centric counterinsurgency (Alderson 2007, pp.6-11). The 2006 US Army-Marines counterinsurgency doctrine, FM3-24, also emphasised the importance of developing the capacity to deliver kinetic and non-kinetic effects (Heuser 2006, pp.165-170; Jensen 2016, p.225). It can be argued that military occupation was not the most effective strategy to stabilise Afghanistan (Nagl 2015). But once ISAF was deployed, there is a broad consensus in the academic literature that population-centric counterinsurgency formed the most appropriate tactical- and operational-level approach (Greenhill and Staniland 2007; Heuser 2006). Hence *Bundeswehr* doctrine exhibits a failure to undertake timely and effective inter-organisational learning from alliance partners about counterinsurgency best-practice.

The following section demonstrates that this delayed and partial inter-organisational doctrinal learning was, partly, the result of a strategic culture that was antithetical to learning. It created a toxic environment for learning, where bureaucratic politics, culturally-embedded professional role conceptions and reputational concerns corrupted learning activities. However, the section points, especially, to the failure of the BMVg’s civilian leadership to promote effective ministerial-level oversight of absorptive capacity.

**The Development and Impact of *Bundeswehr* Absorptive Capacity**

The German Army exhibited two key features of best-practice in doctrinal absorptive capacity during ISAF. First, it deployed a substantial number of liaison officers to alliance-partner warfare development centres, tasked with hunting-down new knowledge. They were important conduits for counterinsurgency learning and many were intimately involved in drafting host country doctrine (Interviews 1, 10, 11). Furthermore, the *Bundeswehr* hosted liaison officers from diverse allied/friendly nations, who provided input to doctrine development (Interview 11).

Second, while it is not possible to identify German Army ‘incubators’ during ISAF, an important doctrinal think-tank existed between 2006 and 2013: the Working Group on Joint and Combined Operations (AGJACOP) (Interview 11). Its development resulted from growing operational pressures and the military hierarchy’s recognition of the need to improve Army capacity to contribute to joint doctrine debates (Interview 11). AGJACOP formed a hub for inter-organisational knowledge transfer and a catalyst for building relationships with allied warfare development centres. Furthermore, AGJACOP personnel received drafts of NATO partners’ doctrine for comment via liaison officers (Interview 11).

However, German strategic culture limited AGJACOP’s capacity to promote counterinsurgency learning between 2006 and 2009. The Defence Minister, Franz-Josef Jung, (2005-2009) refused to recognise that German operations had shifted from stabilisation to counterinsurgency (Schreer 2010, 99-100). Jung was constrained by German strategic culture, a legacy of the moral and military defeat of WW2. It is characterised by a preference for multilateral solutions to international problems and has traditionally emphasised the importance of reliability and predictability as an alliance partner. Crucially, it contains a strong anti-militaristic sentiment which emphasised the use of military force only in self-defence. This dimension of German strategic culture had undergone only incremental change during the post-Cold War era. Apart from German participation in airstrikes during NATO’s Operation Allied Force in 1999, the *Bundeswehr* had been deployed only in low- to medium-intensity operations, hence the challenges of counterinsurgency sat uneasily with strategic culture (Baumann and Hellmann 2001; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2006; Hilpert 2014).

As Hyde-Price (2015, p.606) highlights, the German political elite has repeatedly missed opportunities to initiate a broader societal debate about the role of military force in protecting national interests. The fear of the negative electoral consequences of being out-of-step with public opinion has led, since the mid-2000s, to a ‘weak’ and more uncertain strategic culture, where the unwillingness of the political elite to champion a more active role for the military began to corrode Germany’s reliability as an alliance partner (Hyde-Price 2015, p.601).

As the security situation in Kunduz deteriorated from 2006, the presence of AGJACOP and a dense network of allied liaison officers ensured that the *Bundeswehr* was undertaking intellectual counterinsurgency groundwork, despite the impact of strategic culture (Interview 11). AGJACOP began to develop counterinsurgency doctrine informally, in secret, drawing heavily upon inter-organisational learning from the UK and US. This process was driven by recognition of UK and US counterinsurgency expertise, as well as the high-level of social proximity and trust that existed with UK and US military personnel and warfare development centres (Coticchia and Moro 2016, pp.700-701; Interviews 10, 11). Knowledge-sharing took place through the personal relationships established between German and allied doctrine writers and via the input of allied liaison officers at the Leadership Academy and German liaison officers overseas (Interview 11).

While the absence of explicit counterinsurgency doctrine undermined the coherence of pre-deployment training for ISAF, AGJACOP’s inter-organisational learning did enrich officer education. AGJACOP ran twice-monthly seminars with educators from the Officer Training Academy in Dresden and *Bundeswehr* Leadership Academy. They ensured that, from early 2009, younger officers received a stronger counterinsurgency education (Interview 11). These officers were then emboldened to integrate counterinsurgency exercises into their pre-deployment training and to act as counterinsurgency advocates (Interviews 12, 25).

The September 2009 airstrike initiated by the German Colonel Georg Klein, which killed between 30 and 40 Afghan civilians, and subsequent appointment of Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg as Defence Minister (2009-11) formed an important moment of crisis (Schuessler and Heng 2013, pp.359-60). It highlighted that Germany’s risk-averse approach in Afghanistan could not only lead to the loss of civilian lives, but also undermine NATO strategy (Schuessler and Heng 2013, p.368). In short, the threat of defeat began to increase. While not as acute as during a ‘war of necessity’, the consequence of outright German failure in Kunduz would be highly-damaging both for ISAF and Germany’s reputation as an alliance partner (Interview 9, 20, 23). The *Bundeswehr’s* deficits in counterinsurgency were also thrown into sharp relief by the population-focused counterinsurgency strategy launched by COMISAF General Stanley McChrystal in September 2009.

These events incentivised zu Guttenberg to take significant political risk by expending personal political capital on behalf of a more proactive role for the German military in Afghanistan (Hilpert 2014). Zu Guttenberg’s entrepreneurship fostered only incremental change in German strategic culture, which remains characterised by strong degree of uncertainty about the role of military force (Hyde-Price 2015). Nevertheless, the September 2009 airstrike and zu Guttenberg’s response had important implications for intra- and inter-organisational within the *Bundeswehr* by providing strategic legitimacy for adaptation and learning gained from operational experiences in ISAF (Noetzel 2011, p.398). As Hilpert (2014, p.3) notes, zu Guttenberg signalled that ‘…if need be, Germany can go all the way. It can battle an insurgency, it can participate in offensive operations aimed at defeating a military adversary and it can protect its interests with military force’.

Crucially, it meant that by late-2009 there was high-level political support for counterinsurgency doctrine development, which led the AGJACOP to develop two counterinsurgency-related objectives (Interviews 9, 11). First, to disseminate the results of inter-organisational counterinsurgency learning through workshops, one-to-one engagement with key personnel and publishing working papers (Interview 11). Second, as a precursor to counterinsurgency doctrine, AGJACOP hoped to kick-start vigorous internal debate about the utility of counterinsurgency in Kunduz. AGJACOP was successful in disseminating learning, especially via working papers about allied counterinsurgency doctrine. They were regularly downloaded from AGJACOP’s intranet site and discussed in joint working groups (Interview 11). But AGJACOP failed to stimulate open internal counterinsurgency debate, due, in part, to two key variables.

First of all, the *Bundeswehr’s* ‘layered’ organisational culture, which was composed of three visions of military professionalism (Interviews 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25). ‘*Generation Einsatz*’ (the ‘mission generation’) consisted of younger soldiers/officers whose main experience of deployment was ISAF and understood the importance of integrating kinetic and non-kinetic activities (Chiari 2014, p.155; Naumann 2014, pp.306-308). In contrast, the formative experiences of the military hierarchy (Colonel and above) lay in the Cold War and Balkan deployments (Muench 2015, pp.98-99). These personnel have been termed the ‘Training Generation’ by *Generation Einsatz* (Seiffert 2014, pp.329-332). Although some served in Afghanistan at high-levels of command, their professional self-image focused on the efficient application of high-intensity force within clearly specified strategic goals (Naumann 2014, p.310). They were uncomfortable with the political considerations and uncertainties of counterinsurgency (Muench 2015, pp.208-213). Finally, the Stabilisation Generation, who were specialist peacekeepers, influenced predominantly by the experience of providing security within a permissive operational environment in the Balkans during the 1990s. This approach was codified in H.Dv. 100/100, which emphasised the use of force as a last resort and ensuring civilian agencies undertake non-kinetic activities (Sangar 2014, p.203).

Cultural divergence was sharpened by bureaucratic politics. The Training Generation emphasised a narrative of the nature of conflict that necessitated investment in expensive weapons systems. Counterinsurgency threatened to undermine the Army’s budget-share, which enhanced some of the Training Generation’s opposition to widening the military role beyond providing security in the final version of counterinsurgency Guidance (Interviews 9, 10, 12, 19, 20, 25; Muench 2015, pp.98-99). Resistance to doctrinal change, especially the implications of counterinsurgency for lower-tactical doctrine, was also driven by reputational concerns of senior officers reluctant to admit to deficiencies in their area of responsibility (Interviews 9, 12, 14, 15, 19, 20, 25).

However, bureaucratic politics and organisational culture should not be viewed as stand-alone variables in undermining AGJACOP’s efforts to stimulate inter-organisational counterinsurgency learning. They were a consequence of the longer-term negative impact that German strategic culture had exerted on health of other key dimensions of doctrinalabsorptive capacity.

First of all, the *Bundeswehr’s* intellectual architecture had limited capacity to support inter-organisational learning. Many scholars at the German Armed Forces Centre for Military History and the Social Science (ZMSBw) enjoy long-term contracts and have civilian status, enhancing their intellectual autonomy (Interview 15). But the long shadow of German history left the ZMSBw highly-reluctant to provide research of use for ongoing operations (Interviews 1, 6, 15, 16; Sangar 2014, p.142). The *Reichsarchiv* (the interwar version of the ZMSBw), played an important role in the flawed historical narrative that contributed to German revisionism (Sangar 2014, p.172). Hence the ZMSBw was placed under direct control of the BMVg rather than the military hierarchy, and did not begin to systematically analyse lessons from the *Bundeswehr’s* post-Cold War operational experiences until 2010 (Sangar 2014, p.217). Thus, the ZMSBw played little role in providing historical context to AGJACOP counterinsurgency debates or in the *Bundeswehr* lessons-learned process (Interviews 11, 15, 17, 18, 19). Furthermore, while the *Bundeswehr’s* Social Science Institute (SOWI) undertook rigorous military sociological research until it was merged with the ZMSBw in 2012, it played little role in doctrine development.[[10]](#endnote-10)

There are no *Bundeswehr* publications which permit critical engagement with doctrine (Muench 2015, p.98). Officer education also lacks the intellectual checks and balances necessary to offset the corrupting influence of organisational culture and bureaucratic politics on curriculum design. The military hierarchy is able to exert decisive influence over the BLS (intermediate staff course) and LGAN (general staff course) curricula at the Leadership Academy, which does not include systematic participation of external academics in curriculum development and teaching (Interview 12).

The longer-term negative impact of German strategic culture was also felt inthe lessons-learned process. Driven by civilian and military recognition of the need to improve intra-organisational learning following a mounting number of expeditionary operations, a lessons-learned process was initiated in 2006 within the J357 Division of the Joint Forces Operations Command (Interviews 16, 20). The *Bundeswehr* lessons-learned process scores well on several features enabling managers to influence learning (Sheremata, 2000, p.400). Its close relationship with the BMVg’s Urgent Operational Requirements scheme granted the lessons-learned process control over scarce resources, while its location at the Operations Command endowed it with centrality in information networks and formal authority (Interviews 6, 16, 20).

The lessons-learned process enjoyed some successes in recalibrating tactics, techniques and procedures and procurement during ISAF (Interviews 1, 10, 20). But it had limited capacity to introduce intra- or inter-organisational learning about counterinsurgency. During the tenure of Defence Minister Jung, the lessons-learned process was designed by the military hierarchy to ensure ‘politically incorrect’ learning did not emerge and challenge the narrative of ISAF as a stabilisation operation (Interviews 6, 16, 20). J357 controlled formal knowledge acquisition tools and was a gatekeeper for information flows to the services and BMVg. Crucially, the lessons-learned process did not include a cross-functional team (Interviews 6, 16, 20). High-ranking personnel from different functional areas were not included in decision-making and no representatives from NGOs, OGDs, the ZMSBw or academia participated.

As a consequence, from its inception in 2006 until 2009, lessons-learned failed to act as a conduit for the substantial counterinsurgency-related individual and group learning that was taking place among personnel deployed in Afghanistan (Interviews 1, 10, 20, 25). Some useful learning was passed on informally through the participation of recently-returned company commanders in training exercises. But such knowledge-sharing was very ‘hit and miss’, as it was filtered by the professional role conception of the officer involved (Interview 22). Greater counterinsurgency-related learning began to emerge from Kunduz via lessons-learned knowledge acquisition activities, especially about TTP, once the political leadership signalled its greater openness to ‘learning from below’ after 2009. However, the absence of lessons-learned process best-practice allowed organisational culture and bureaucratic politics to continue to exert significant influence over counterinsurgency knowledge transfer (Interviews 9, 10, 14). Thus, AGJACOP gained few useful insights from the lessons-learned process for counterinsurgency doctrine development (Interview 11).

Strategic culture also left a negative long-term impact on decentralised and flexible leadership. Mission command takes centre-stage in *Bundeswehr* doctrine. Yet its application during ISAF was deeply problematic. Until 2009, when a more offensive approach was permitted, commanders would not allow adaptation which might put German personnel in harm’s way (Interview 9, 13, 21). Only after 2009 did commanders allow company commanders to experiment with counterinsurgency (Interview 9; Interview 13). Yet the absence of counterinsurgency doctrine and the competing visions of military professionalism fostered incoherence in pre-deployment training (Interviews 14, 22). Hence only a limited number of troops had the skills and knowledge to take advantage of mission command and attempt to apply counterinsurgency (Interviews 14, 22). Furthermore, the insufficient resources that the German contingent could draw upon for development activities and inter-ministerial contestation over the Comprehensive Approach within Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Kunduz stymied efforts to deliver population-focused counterinsurgency (Sangar 2014, p.209; Muench 2015, p.216).

Finally, the effect of strategic culture on officers’ willingness to experiment and take risks remainedpronounced. For the majority of the post-Cold War era, officers were fearful of creative behaviour and offering constructive criticism to the military and civilian hierarchy, for fear of harming their promotion prospects (Interview 12). Little was done by zu Guttenberg, or his successors, to address the organisational ‘culture of blame’ that had taken root (Interview 13, Interview 14). Crucially, promotion processes still pay little regard to rewarding officers who pursue knowledge experimentation (Interviews 12, 13).

In the absence of healthy learning architecture, the emergence of counterinsurgency doctrine would necessitate change in the Army leadership through the September 2012 appointment of General Bruno Kasdorf as Army Chief of Staff (Interviews 11, 14). General Kasdorf’s formative military experiences were rooted in the Cold War and Balkans, but unlike his predecessor, General Werner Freers, he had ISAF operational experience as ISAF Chief of Staff in 2007. He was also open to US military thinking, having studied at the US Army War College (Interviews 11, 14).

General Kasdorf used the BMVg’s greater openness to learning to pursue counterinsurgency development (Interviews 11, 12). Joint meetings between US and German generals were organised to discuss counterinsurgency and AGJACOP was involved in developing counterinsurgency leadership exercises for senior officers (Interview 11). Furthermore, General Kasdorf ordered the Office for Army Development to consider the lower tactical-level implications of counterinsurgency (Interview 18). But the Army’s poor absorptive capacity still allowed bureaucratic politics, organisational culture and senior officers’ reputational concerns to exert corrupting influence on doctrinal content, which failed to properly recognise the military contribution to the non-kinetic dimensions of counterinsurgency.

The paucity of absorptive capacity not only created a fertile context for variables endogenous to the military to flourish and militate against counterinsurgency doctrine, but also improvements to PACAP and RACAP. Thus ‘bottom-up’ leadership from themilitaryhierarchy for improvement in doctrinal absorptive capacity did not emerge. It threatened to expose bureaucratic politics, culturally-embedded military professional role conceptions and officers’ reputational concerns to unwanted critical scrutiny (Interviews 9, 13, 14, 17, 19, 20).

However, to fully understand the *Bundeswehr’s* poor absorptive capacity post-2009 we must look beyond strategic culture and its exacerbation of corrupting variables endogenous to the military. Crucially, the BMVg’s political hierarchy failed in its responsibility to remedy dysfunctional absorptive capacity. Although the threat of defeat after late-2009 led the BMVg’s civilian leadership to be much more open to intra- and inter-organisational learning, it exerted virtually no oversight in improving the *Bundeswehr’s* capacity to generate such learning (Interviews 1, 6, 9, 10, 12, 16, 17, 19, 20, 23, 25).

There was no awareness within political hierarchy of the importance of ministerial leadership on the detail of absorptive capacity (Interviews 19, 20, 23). Hence only three staff officers within the BMVg have, as a secondary role, responsibility for overseeing learning processes (Interviews 19, 23). They have neither the time, nor the authority, to effectively identify and promote learning best-practice, and must rotate posts every three years. Consequently, deficits in absorptive capacity initially generated by strategic culture remain a persistent problem.

**INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

**Conclusion: The Importance of Active and Well-informed Civilian Oversight of Absorptive Capacity**

This article has made two contributions to understanding of military emulation. First, it has explored the insights of the literature on absorptive capacity about the activities and processes which facilitate effective inter-organisational learning in doctrine. In doing so, the article has provided greater understanding about the contribution that management studies can make to the study of military learning (Griffin, 2017). Second, the case study allows us to draw four tentative observations about the mutually-constitutive relationship between the variables identified by the literature on the sources of military change and absorptive capacity.

First, it highlights that the detail of learning activities and processes matters. They can have a positive influence on inter-organisational military learning despite severe structural impediments to learning. The presence of key features of doctrinal absorptive capacity, notably AGJACOP and German and allied liaison officers, allowed the *Bundeswehr* to undertake intellectual groundwork for counterinsurgency doctrine between 2006-09. AGJACOP was also active in recalibrating officer education to the demands of counterinsurgency in the absence of doctrine, which contributed to a gradual strengthening of Generation *Einsatz.*

But structural variables nevertheless exerted a very important impact on the emergence of strong doctrinal absorptive capacity. Hence the article’s second conclusion about relationship between structural variables and absorptive capacity is that variables exogenous to the military play a key role in setting the conditions for healthy learning architecture. Strategic culture enjoys significant analytical leverage in understanding the development of the *Bundeswehr’s* inter-organisational learning capability. It determined the kind of learning deemed acceptable by the political leadership and harmed the development of *Bundeswehr* absorptive capacity. The threat of defeat was also an important driver of improvement in learning. As the security situation in northern Afghanistan deteriorated and pressure from important allies increased, the German political elite began to undertake bolder leadership to legitimise the use of force as a tool of foreign policy, providing greater impetus to advocates of inter-organisational counterinsurgency knowledge transfer(Hilpert 2014, p.3).

However, the article’s third main finding about the sources of absorptive capacity is that the dissipation of a strategic culture antithetical to learning in the context of the growing threat of defeat does not automatically foster improvement in absorptive capacity ‘from below’. The same variables endogenous to the military which fostered delayed and watered-down inter-organisational learning in counterinsurgency also formed a disincentive to ‘bottom-up’ innovation in learning architecture. Improved absorptive capacity was perceived as dangerous by the military hierarchy. It threatened to expose the corrupting impact on decision-making of bureaucratic politics, culturally-embedded professional role conceptions and reputational concerns (Interviews 9, 13, 14, 17, 19, 20). The influence of these variables was particularly pronounced given the potent legacy of strategic culture for doctrinal absorptive capacity.

Hence the article’s final key finding about the sources of absorptive capacity is that agency, in the form of ministerial-level investment in active and well-informedoversight of the activities which support absorptive capacity, is of great importance. Warfare at the tactical and operational levels is, to a large extent, an ‘autonomous science’ dominated by military professionals (Huntington, 1957, p.57). But civilian oversight is essential to help establish the absorptive capacity which can help promote a more objective, evidence-based approach to tactical- and operational-level activity (Imlay and Toft 2006, p.250; Posen 1984). As Feaver (2003, p.286) notes: ‘It matters what types of punishments military agents can expect. It matters how monitoring mechanisms function…’.

Investment in permanent civilian personnel, who can improve and retain ministerial-level institutional knowledge about best-practice in absorptive capacity, is therefore vital. Crucially, they should be endowed with the authority, resources and time to promote absorptive capacity best-practice at the service and joint levels. Intrusive and well-informed monitoring of the mechanisms and content of learning processes by other, non-ministerial, organs of civilian control (such as Parliamentary Defence Committees), is also required. In addition, it is important that civilians have effective tools to sanction the military hierarchy when evidence of serious corruption of learning processes by bureaucratic politics, organisational culture, or perceptions of personal reputational damage emerges (Feaver 2003, p.297). Civilian engagement with the mechanisms and content of learning would also be beneficial to avoiding a ‘civil-military’ gap by enhancing mutual understanding between the civilian leadership and military.

Although the article’s findings support Posen’s (1984) arguments about the merits of civilian intervention, Rosen’s (1998) insights about the importance of ‘military mavericks’ nevertheless provide important guidance for how civilian oversight of learning should proceed. Civilian oversight of learning processes is much more likely to be effective when it supports the rise of innovative and respected junior/mid-ranking officers (Rosen 1998, 142-43). Hence it is important that (where possible), civilians ensure that promotion processes allow officers with recent combat experience, who have demonstrated creativity in the field, to climb the hierarchy. Many of these officers will have had personal experience of the negative consequences of poor absorptive capacity for military effectiveness and thus are more likely to act as ‘institutional protection’[[11]](#endnote-11) for civilian efforts to improve learning.

While highly-valuable, civilian leadership is not a silver bullet for overcoming barriers to inter-organisational learning, and is unlikely to emerge in the presence of a non-facilitative strategic culture and in the absence of external threat. However, as Davidson (2011) and Marcus (2015) demonstrate, once improvements in learning architecture are embedded, they can ameliorate the detrimental impact of variables endogenous to the military. Even small improvements in a military’s propensity to knowledge exploration have important potential consequences, not only for military effectiveness and the safety of soldiers, but also for civilians at the ‘receiving end’ of intervention (Dyson 2019b).

The article points to two areas for future research. First, there is a need for further case study research to identify the conditions which facilitate absorptive capacity, especially inter-organisational learning best-practice in military activities beyond doctrine. Research is also required to identify lessons that can be drawn from other public sector professions involved in high-risk, complex and rapidly-changing contexts like health services, fire and rescue services and police forces. Their experiences with organisational learning, especially lessons-learned, have potentially-valuable wider application, but have received little scholarly and practitioner attention (Interview 24; Piening 2013, p.210).

Second, there is a need to explore the insights that the literature on organisational learning within corporate strategic alliances can provide about the role that NATO, especially the JALLC, can play in enhancing inter-organisational knowledge transfer (Inkpen 1998; Loebbecke, van Fenema and Powell 2016, pp. 4-14; Meier 2011). Corporate strategic alliances are, as Parise (2002, p.3) notes: “cooperative relationships between two or more independent organizations, designed to achieve mutually beneficial business goals for as long as is economically viable”. While some strategic alliances are fleeting, others are long-lived and include governance structures with formal learning mechanisms. The topic of the circumstances in which knowledge is shared within military alliances and operations has received only limited scholarly attention (Goldenberg et al 2017; Hardt, 2017, 2018; Soeters and Goldenberg, 2019). The extensive academic literature on strategic alliances offers an opportunity to explore in greater detail the activities and processes which facilitate knowledge sharing between alliance partners on a bi-lateral basis, as well as how to enhance the role of alliance governance structures, such as the JALLC, in promoting knowledge transfer between member-states.

**Declaration of interests**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Tables**

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| --- |
| Table 1  *Bundeswehr interview partner perceptions of impediments to improved absorptive capacity* |
| Variable Number of interview partners %  Bureaucratic politics 8 34.8  Competing professional 15 65.2  role conceptions  (organisational culture)  Perceptions of personal 9 39.1  reputational damage  (organisational politics)  Strategic culture 23 100  Weak civilian oversight 13 56.5  of absorptive capacity |
| *Note.* 23 officers were interviewed |

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1. Organisation studies and management studies have also failed to sufficiently examine military organisations. See Visser (2008, p.127). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. On US military learning, see Davidson (2011), Downie (1998), Hoffmann (2016, pp.22-29) Nagl (2002) Russell, (2010) and Serena (2011); On British and German military learning, see Anonymous (2019b); on British military learning, see Catignani (2014) and Foley et al (2011). On learning within the IDF, see Marcus (2015; 2019). On the impact of historical lessons on doctrine and operational strategy, see: Fitzgerald (2013) and Sangar (2014). On the neglect of ‘bottom-up’ learning in military studies, see Grissom (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Military innovation can be considered as: “…the discovery of new knowledge, invention of new practices or their recombination in new forms” (Resende-Santos 2007, p.72). On military innovation studies, see Grissom (2006) and Griffin (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Inter-organisational learning capability in doctrine refers to the capacity to identify innovations and best-practice in other nations’ doctrinal publications and from emerging ideas within their warfare centres. It also incorporates the ability to assess the relevance of potential allied doctrinal innovations or best-practice through critical analysis of (i) ‘bottom-up’ individual and group learning by a military’s own personnel deployed in the field/on exercises (including learning which derives from interaction with allied troops in multinational operations); (ii) the experiences (where relevant) of external partners such as NGOs, OGDs, and, (iii) the insights of academic scholarship. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Up-to-date doctrine is of little utility if officer education does not include the study of doctrine relevant to operational requirements, or provide officers with the critical thinking skills to interpret and evaluate doctrine in the light of the specific challenges they face. In its focus on improving knowledge transformation, the article highlights key organisational activities and processes which will not only improve doctrinal learning, but also the ability of an organisation to enhance its wider culture of experimentation and creativity, with positive implications for officer education. However, systematic examination of officer education best-practice is beyond the article’s scope. On the perils of deficits in officer education, see Alderson (2013, p.287) and Catignani (2014, pp.44-6). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In doing so, the article builds upon the scholarship of Horowitz (2010) by adding greater nuance to understanding of the organisational features which promote ‘adoption capacity’ (the capacity of states to adopt military innovations). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Knowledge ambiguity refers to: “the inherent and irreducible uncertainty as to precisely what the underlying knowledge components and sources are and how they interact” (van Wijk, Jansen and Lyles, 2009, pp.832-833). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The literature emphasises the importance of large volumes of relationships, mutual trust and reducing cultural distance (van Wijk, Jansen and Lyles, 2009, pp.834-835; Coticchia and Moro, 2016, p.700). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. A similar argument is made by Goldman (2006), who posits that cultural and ideological orthodoxies of political and military elites are the key variables explaining the scope, pace and extent of the cross-national diffusion of military innovations. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Email correspondence, two former SOWI academics, 20 August 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. On ‘institutional protection’ for civilian efforts to steer change within military organisations, see Rynning (2001/02), pp.108-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)