

# Implementing military doctrine: A theoretical model

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## ABSTRACT

Ideally, military doctrines are not just written; they are implemented. However, there exists a theory gap on why new doctrines are sometimes successfully implemented and other times not. Based on ideas presented in previous research, this study develops a theoretical model for under what conditions new formal doctrines are most likely to be implemented. The model suggests that cultural coherence, authority and credibility are decisive for the implementation of new doctrine.

## Introduction

Scholars are increasingly raising arguments about the importance of military doctrines.<sup>1</sup> The interest in doctrine stems primarily from the growing understanding of military doctrine as a force multiplier; the main argument being that doctrines allow the coordinated and cohesive application of military power in ways tailored to the organization.<sup>2</sup> With examples ranging from Gustavus Adolphus to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) it is argued that the actor with the best doctrine wins the day, even if numerically inferior to its opponent. A popular definition of military doctrine is by Harald Høiback as “*authoritative documents military forces use to guide their actions containing fundamental principles that require judgment in application.*”<sup>3</sup> According to Høiback, doctrines have to include three core components: theory, culture and authority.<sup>4</sup> Theory means that doctrines have causal arguments for why their prescribed solutions are expected to work. Culturally, doctrines have to be attuned to the culture that they speaks to. Authority means that the doctrine is sanctioned by the organization. Høiback further argued that doctrines serve at least one of the following three functions: as a tool to command military forces, as a tool to educate military forces or as a tool to change military forces.<sup>5</sup> In short, doctrines that serve as a tool of command clarify command philosophies. Educational doctrines are used to educate military personnel on their mission, mandates or theories of war. As a tool of change, doctrines can prescribe new operational behaviors, which are then implemented within the organization. Høiback also hinted toward a fourth purpose of doctrine: as a tool of signaling.<sup>6</sup> The argument is that doctrines can serve to inform the public or another external audience about the conduct of a military force, such as how the 2006 U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine was aimed partly at an American public.<sup>7</sup>

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This article focuses on doctrines as a tool of change and uses Harald Høiback's definition of doctrine, but supplements it with the idea of doctrines existing on both a formal and a practiced plane. This article defines formal doctrine as "authoritative documents military forces use to guide change, containing fundamental principles that require judgment in application." The article defines practiced doctrine as "the practiced fundamental principles when applying military force in deployments or exercises." Meir Finkel has noted that experience, beliefs and enculturation tend to shape practiced doctrine, which can create a barrier toward accepting new formal doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Armed with a definition of doctrine, we now turn to the utility of doctrine. As noted above, there is an understanding that doctrines serve as force multipliers. This can be the case whether used as a tool for command, education, change or signaling. However, not all doctrines seem to function as force multipliers and in fact, there are examples of when doctrine has even degraded the fighting capacity of an otherwise superior force. The French doctrine of methodical battle fared poorly against the Germans in 1940, despite French superiority on most quantifiable dimensions.<sup>9</sup> The question is therefore why some doctrines seem to work and others not. Jan Angstrom and Jerker Widén have argued that the problem when evaluating doctrine is the lack of feedback mechanisms, since wars are rare and immensely complex.<sup>10</sup> While it is generally possible to apply hindsight to a historical case and identify several ways in which doctrine could have been altered the outcome, estimating beforehand whether a doctrine will work or not is close to impossible. Despite this difficulty, several studies have tried to distinguish good doctrines from bad, evaluating doctrine on premises such as whether they reduce uncertainty, create cohesion, strengthen norms and identity or promote flexible behaviors.<sup>11</sup>

This article is concerned with doctrine as a tool of change. It sees good doctrine as one that manages to bring about the intended change, whilst a bad doctrine is one that is ignored, leaving a gap between what has been formally decided upon and what is actually practiced. While there are studies that suggests benefits from having weak formal doctrines,<sup>12</sup> this study assumes that it is generally preferable that the formal and practiced doctrines overlap. Discrepancies between formal and practiced doctrine creates disunity of effort, which in the worst instances can lead to defeat on the battlefield if the expectations laid out in formal doctrines are not reflected by what is practiced.<sup>13</sup>

## The knowledge gap

Previous research on doctrine as a tool of change falls within two research traditions: doctrinal research and military innovation studies. The early works within doctrinal research generally treated doctrine as a dependent variable and tried to understand what causes change in military doctrines.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, contemporary works on military doctrine have also focused mainly on explaining why doctrines have changed.<sup>15</sup> There are a few exceptions that have examined how doctrines have been used for change and in that process have discussed success and failure in doctrinal implementation.<sup>16</sup>

Within military innovation studies, doctrines sometimes appear as an independent variable, being either the source or hinderence to innovation. Stephen Rosen argued

that centrally distributed doctrines increased the pace at which lower echelons could innovate, as there was a best practice to depart from.<sup>17</sup> Deobrah Avant argued that cultural predispositions influenced how new formal doctrines were accepted and implemented.<sup>18</sup> Raphael Marcus and Matt Matthews both argued that novel doctrines risk being disregarded when lacking cultural coherence or credibility.<sup>19</sup>

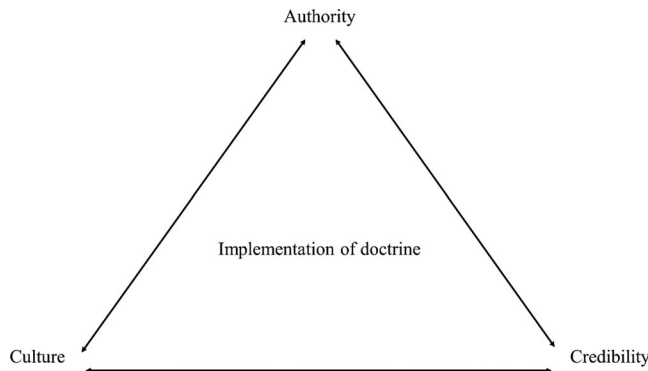
Previous research suggests that while new formal doctrines can change the behavior of armed forces, they seem to do so only under certain conditions. Previous research's focused on how doctrines are conceived, rather than how they are implemented, has led to an implicit assumption that new doctrines are automatically adopted after having been formalized. As such, ideas on why new doctrines are likely to be implemented have only been presented anecdotally and not as part of a coherent theory. There is to my knowledge no formulated theories for under what conditions new formal doctrines are likely to be implemented and this lack of theory constitutes the research gap that this study addresses.

### **A theoretical model on doctrinal implementation**

This section formulates a theoretical model on doctrinal implementation by synthesizing the sporadic ideas from previous research on doctrinal implementation into a coherent theoretical model. The point of departure is that in order to change, military organizations conceive new formal doctrine pointing out the way ahead. The new doctrine is formalized in writing and distributed within the organization with the hope that it will be implemented as practiced doctrine. However, new doctrine will only be successfully implemented in some cases. Other times, the new doctrine will be shunned and the organization continues with its past practices. This model uses two ideal types of outcomes: successful implementation and failed implementation. In reality, it is reasonable to assume that doctrines are likely to be implemented in degrees, with some concepts adopted but others shunned. The merit of using ideal types in the model is that the ideas raised in previous research has tended to treat the outcome of implementation as a dichotomous variable. It also makes the model simpler. The model is structured around three factors were raised as key for doctrinal implementation in previous studies. These are cultural coherency, authority and credibility (Figure 1).

The first and most emphasized explanation for doctrinal implementation is cultural coherency. While several authors have noted that culture is hard to define, most works that address doctrines and culture tend to understand culture as something similar to the assumptions, ideas, norms and beliefs that shape an organizations actions and how it perceives the world around it.<sup>20</sup> This study defines culture as “preferences about how to fight” and emphasizes the unarticulated and irrational aspects of culture. This means that the assumptions underpinning preferences on how to fight may not be articulated. It can also mean that preferences are irrational, such as how armies have been unwilling to absorb lessons that are in conflict with their already held beliefs.

Assessing culture requires researchers to examine expressions of preferences about how to fight. Previous studies have measured culture through the study of articles in



**Figure 1.** The three primary factors of doctrinal implementation.<sup>46</sup>

military periodicals, personal and public correspondences, military school curriculums and through interviews with officers. The researcher then has to assess which preferences can be understood as dominant, and therefore an expression of culture, and which can be seen as outliers. Coherence is the harmony between the concepts that a formal doctrine prescribes and the culture of the organization. Theoretically, a new doctrine that prescribes a way of fighting that is in harmony with what the organization already believes has a higher chance of successful implementation. In contrast, doctrines that are not culturally coherent are likely to be rejected because they feel wrong, even though they might prescribe concepts that are rationally sound. A perhaps most famous example of how lack of cultural coherence led to failed implementation of new doctrine is the unwillingness of cavalry units in several armies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to implement new doctrines, despite that their traditional tactics were ill suited for the industrialized battlefield.<sup>21</sup> Units clung to doctrines of old, despite credible and battle proven arguments as to the vulnerability of the cavalry rising from conflicts such as the Boer and Crimean Wars.<sup>22</sup> The unwillingness of British cavalry to comply with new formal doctrines to change their tactics in the wake of the South African War, because the doctrines broke with their preferences on how to fight, serves as an example of how lack of cultural coherence can hinder doctrinal implementation.<sup>23</sup>

Other examples include attempts to change command philosophies within the British, Israeli and U.S. militaries through new formal doctrines during the latter half of the Cold War.<sup>24</sup> All three nations set out to impose command philosophies built upon decentralization and initiative, popularly labeled *Auftragstaktik* or mission command. The Israelis were largely successful in implementing their doctrine, as the culture of the IDF already encompassed many of the assumptions and beliefs that underpin mission command.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, both the British and U.S. militaries had cultures that lent toward linear thinking and a tradition of command through directives, rather than missions. Spencer Fitz-Gibbons noted in a controversial study that during the Falklands War, not even the elite British Second Para had successfully adopted mission command, despite mission command being in the formal British doctrines.<sup>26</sup> For the U.S., despite immense battlefield successes in both wars against Iraq, critics have argued that the U.S. has not implemented a command philosophy built upon mission command when conducting conventional operations.<sup>27</sup>

A final example of how cultural coherence has led to successful doctrinal implementation is the British Army's change back to a practiced doctrine of non-nuclear conventional warfighting after the 1989 British Military Doctrine. Simon Moody argues that the successful implementation of the 1989 doctrine was because it spoke to the organizational culture of the British Army, which still preferred the idea of conventional combat to the nuclear battlefield doctrines.<sup>28</sup>

The second argument that tends to surface for successful implementation is the need for doctrines to have authority. In the surveyed works, authority is often understood as either formal authorization or backing from a position of influence. This study understands authority to include both an informal and a formal aspect: that a senior commander has authorized the doctrine and that its implementation within the organization is without choice. The first part is important, as the signing off on a doctrine by the senior commander signals the importance of doctrine. The sentiment is that if people who have influence within an organization give a doctrine their blessing, others will emulate their attitude toward the doctrine and implement the doctrine's prescriptions. This argument can be somewhat extended to also include endorsement of doctrine by people of influence, even though they formally lack a position of power within the organization. The second aspect, that implementation is without choice, is also important as the organization may otherwise show reluctance toward adopting novel practices. This argument is based on a general understanding of military organizations unwilling to change, unless forced to do so. The article defines authority as "sanctioned by positions of power and implementation without choice."

Authority can be assessed by examining who signed off on the doctrine, the logic being that the higher the rank of the signer, the higher the likelihood of implementation. Authority can also be assessed based on whether the prescriptions are presented as recommendations or rules, the latter increasing the likelihood of implementation. It is also possible to assess softer aspects of authority, by examining what is said about the doctrine through debates within the professional corps. If a doctrine creates a multifaceted debate within a military organization, it can be assumed to have been taken seriously and therefore exercise authority.<sup>29</sup> There is a dilemma in that doctrines that have too much authority can become dogmatic if they are obeyed blindly.<sup>30</sup> Such examples include the French doctrine of methodical battle. While the risk of doctrinal dogmatism is raised, the surveyed literature tends to emphasize that it is more likely that doctrines are not implemented because lack of authority, than that they become dogmatic by being too authoritative.

An example of successful implementation due to authority is how General William E. DePuy managed to get the 1976 FM 100-5 Active Defense doctrine accepted within the U.S. Army. This was partly due to his own position of power as a four star general, but also because he anchored the doctrine with the U.S. Army Chief of Staff and other senior commanders, getting endorsement from people with influence within the army.<sup>31</sup> Another example is the discussion by Wayne Hughes based on personal experiences in the U.S. Navy that doctrines that were not enforced formally tended to be seen as recommendations and were often disregarded in favor of personal experiences.<sup>32</sup> Last, an example of failure to transform because of lack of authority is the attempt to create a balanced all arms structure in the IDF after the Six Day War. While a balanced doctrine was formalized by the General Staff, it lacked informal authority,

as senior officers in both the army and air force organized and trained for overly offensive operations because of the success of attack aircraft and tanks during the war.<sup>33</sup> This created gap between formal doctrine and practice, and the overly offensive posture of the IDF met with significant backlash in the opening of the Yom Kippur War. Had the formal doctrine been implemented, the IDF would likely have fared better in the beginning of the Yom Kippur war.

The third factor identified is the importance of credibility. Unlike culture, which the model understands as a constructivist explanation, credibility is a rationalist explanation that emphasizes rationality and articulation. Credibility means that the concepts prescribed in doctrine are seen as likely to work based one of two logics. The first is that the concepts have been shown to work through actual combat or training and staff games. The other is that they appear as a credible future orientation for a military that is undergoing a major change.

Credibility can be assessed by examining if the ideas presented in novel doctrines were articulated and rational. This can both entail an interaction with the actual doctrines, but also an examination of how practitioners perceived the need doctrines: if the concepts articulated well enough to be understood and if they were rational enough to be accepted by the organization.

An example of successful doctrinal implementation because of credibility is the implementation of German infiltration tactics, which was formalized as doctrine in 1916-1917 after having been validated on the battlefield.<sup>34</sup> A doctrine that was not proven in combat, but was perceived as credible through exercises and staff games was the U.S. 1982 FM 100-5 Operations or AirLand Battle doctrine.<sup>35</sup> It was implemented successfully in the U.S. Army, as the concepts were generally seen as credible based on rational assessments.<sup>36</sup> Another example of concepts tested through games was the U.S. Navy's implementation of aircraft carrier doctrine during the Second World War. After having realized the vulnerability of the battleship, the U.S. Navy switched to a carrier doctrine that had been developed prior to the war through war-gaming, even though it had not yet been tested in combat.<sup>37</sup>

There are also examples of doctrines that have been implemented primarily because they appear as credible future orientation for militaries undergoing major changes. The adoption of counter insurgency doctrines in many western countries in the early 2000s is an example of implementation of concepts that had not been validated, but that appealed to need to find a new *raison d'être* when high intensity interstate warfare seemed to be a thing of the past.<sup>38</sup> In fact, susceptibility to new doctrine seems to be especially high during transitory periods, also illustrated by how both the U.S. Army and Marine Corps drafted and implemented new doctrines following the advent of nuclear weapons to ensure that they remained relevant.<sup>39</sup> Last, two examples of when novel doctrines have failed to be implemented due to lack of credibility are the U.S. and Israeli attempts to adopt doctrines prescribing Effect Based Operations (EBO) in the early 2000s. In retrospect, it has been argued that both militaries saw EBO as an unclear concept and were unwilling, perhaps even unable, to turn it into practice.<sup>40</sup>

Two additional factors were identified as plausible explanations doctrinal implementation, but not included due to only being represented within single works. The first is the degree to which a novel doctrine serves to strengthen group identity.<sup>41</sup> The

argument is that if a doctrine creates a strong sense of group belonging, it is more likely to be implemented. The other argument is the degree to which a doctrine serves to reduce uncertainty.<sup>42</sup> The argument is that a doctrine that manages prescribes solutions that remove uncertainty, regardless of if it is correct or not, is more likely to be implemented, as militaries strive to reduce uncertainty.

This first attempt at constructing a theoretical model of doctrinal implementation suggests that cultural coherence, authority and credibility are the most important factors for whether new formal doctrines purposed as a tool of change are implemented successfully or not. This model is to my knowledge the first coherent theory on doctrinal implementation. A major strength of this model is that it is based on a broad body of scholarly writing on military doctrines, representing both constructivist and rationalist arguments. Using the model to evaluate doctrine creates a simple, yet powerful framework on which the likelihood of doctrinal implementation can be gauged.

A challenge during the construction of the model has been to define the factors, especially whether to distinguish between culture and credibility. Elizabeth Kier argued that the French army was unwilling to implement a doctrine of mobile warfare in the interwar years because their culture caused them to find the idea of conscripts conducting offensive operations incredible; a case of credibility being part of culture.<sup>43</sup> I have however interpreted the general notion within the literature as follows. Culture is unarticulated and irrational, whilst credibility is articulated and rational. I find merit in separating cultural coherence and credibility for two reasons. First, previous research has argued that in order to understand military doctrine, both rationalist and constructivist explanations hold explanatory power.<sup>44</sup> Using culture and credibility provides the model with both. Second, as doctrines can resonate with a culture, but lack credibility and vice versa, it is useful to be able to separate the two. An example of successful doctrinal implementation despite lack of cultural coherence is the transformation of the Swedish Armed Forces into an expeditionary force in the early 2000s. The change was not in line with Swedish military culture, which had focused on national defense, conscription and mass. The change was however seen as a credible way to remain relevant by a military searching for a new *raison d'être*.<sup>45</sup>

The example above highlights that all three factors are not always necessary for doctrinal implementation and that in some cases it may be sufficient with one or two. Which factors are necessary in what cases is however beyond the scope of this study and the survey conducted when constructing this model suggests that in general, the more factors a new doctrine has, the more likely it is to be implemented. This also holds true for degrees of implementation, meaning that the more factors a new doctrine has, the higher the degree of implementation with all likelihood.

## Conclusions

This study has presented a theoretical model for under what conditions novel doctrines purposed as a tool of change are most likely to be implemented. The model suggests that doctrines that are culturally coherent, backed by authority and prescribe methods that are seen as credible are more likely to be implemented. In short, cultural coherency is important because organizations are likely shun concepts that are in conflict with

their presumptions on how to fight. Authority is important because novel doctrine may otherwise be seen as recommendations, rather than something that must be complied with. Credibility means that the concepts that are prescribed by the novel doctrine have to make sense, otherwise armed forces will continue with their past practices.

From a practitioner's point of view, the model can act as a guide when writing new doctrine in order to increase the likelihood of implementation. From an academic perspective, the model constitutes a point of departure for additional theory development on why military doctrines are sometimes implemented and other times not. Future research should especially focus on the following three aspects. First, operationalization of the factors, as having more clearly defined concepts and as methods with which to measure them increases reliability. Second, future research should study under what circumstances specific factors are required for implementation. As suggested in the empirical example of Sweden, not all three factors are required for implementation, but it is unclear which factors are required under what circumstances. Third, future research should move beyond the dichotomous understanding of implementation as either successful or failed and examine how degrees of implementation vary across cases. Such understanding allows for a more nuanced understanding of doctrine as a tool of change with the ability to prioritize certain aspects of implementation.

Previous research is convinced that doctrines can be used as a tool of change. They also suggest that doctrines that have cultural coherence, authority and credibility are more likely to achieve the intended change. Because of the interests and costs involved in transforming military organizations through doctrine, increased understanding of under what circumstances novel doctrines are implemented holds the promise of more appropriate and rational use of doctrine as a tool of change. Such knowledge would be of importance not only to military practitioners, but also for the politicians exercising control over a nation's armed forces. Expanding upon this research agenda holds the promise of better doctrines.

## Notes

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46. Figure created by the author.

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