Toward Strategic Cohesion: A Reply to King’s Criticism of the Call for a Broader View of Cohesion

Ilmari Käihkö

Abstract
In October 2018, Armed Forces & Society published a special issue that called for a theoretical and methodological broadening of the study of cohesion. In a response, King accuses me of ignoring his 2013 book The Combat Soldier, which he feels had already made this call redundant. This answer explains why this is not the case. The Combat Soldier ticks the three boxes of modern, Western, and state military that have dominated the study of cohesion. The resulting narrow vantage point affirms problematic assumptions of Western concepts as absolutes with universal validity with little room for other models of sociopolitical interaction. This becomes especially problematic when King defines cohesion as tactical-level combat performance, the be-all and end-all of what makes, and decides, war. The answer concludes with an appeal for truly interdisciplinary future studies of war that a broader understanding of cohesion, among other things, depends on.

Keywords
cohesion, combat, Eurocentrism, strategy

1 Department of Security, Strategy and Leadership, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden

Corresponding Author:
Ilmari Käihkö, Department of Security, Strategy and Leadership, Swedish Defence University, Box 278 05, 115 93 Stockholm, Sweden.
Email: ilmari.kaihko@fhs.se
In a recent intervention, Anthony King accuses me of speaking past him in a 2018 special issue published in this journal that called for an empirical, methodological, and theoretical broadening of the study of cohesion: empirical broadening through including premodern, nonstate, and non-Western armed groups, methodological broadening through methods like ethnography that allow studying cohesion in these kinds of groups, and theoretical broadening through paying more attention to meso- and macrolevel factors (Käihkö, 2018a, 2018c; these points were further elaborated in Käihkö & Haldén, 2020). While King welcomes the call to broaden the study of cohesion to encompass archival and ethnographic research and non-Western armed groups, he feels that none of my theoretical claims are sustainable. The reason for this is straightforward. According to King (2013), the special issue overlooked his study on *The Combat Soldier* and ignored its broader analytical framework that King (2020) believes explains cohesion even in premodern, nonstate, and non-Western armed groups. I want to thank King for his comments and welcome this opportunity to continue this debate about an important topic.

There are two reasons why the special issue did not engage deeply with King’s work. The first reason is simple. As King acknowledges in his criticism, *The Combat Soldier* “is organized around the historic transition from mass, citizen armies to a professional, all-volunteer forces” (King, 2020, p. 4; see also Siebold et al., 2016) and focuses on microlevel squads and platoons (King, 2013, p. 15). As the subtitle of the book—*Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*—makes clear, King’s study focuses on 20th- and 21st-century Western armed forces, more specifically ground forces. While King (2013) spends a few pages discussing Brazilian, Chinese, and Russian armed forces toward the end of his volume, his main purpose of doing so appears to be convincing the reader that his view of professionalization in the West constitutes a more global military trend (pp. 421–423). Yet neither this nor references to the work of scholars who have emphasized the need of global military history (for instance, see Black, 2020) or the cosmopolitan character of militaries (Barkawi, 2015) changes the fact that like most studies of cohesion, even *The Combat Soldier* focuses on recent developments in Western armed forces and on the microlevel. Consequently, other cases—including premodern, nonstate, and non-Western armed groups—have received less attention. King therefore sidesteps the question whether different circumstances—including our own—require cohesion to be constructed and studied in different ways (Käihkö & Haldén, 2020, p. 519).

King’s (2020) claim that I accuse him of ignoring macrolevel factors altogether is unfounded (p. 5). I cannot find this claim in the special issue, nor does he provide a reference for one. I am well aware that *The Combat Soldier* touches upon issues like patriotism, masculinity, and political motivation (King, 2013, pp. 62–97) but also agree with King’s (2020) acknowledgment that this is done in a limited way (p. 4). The crucial issue at stake here concerns the relative explanatory importance and the explanatory reach King and other authors have allowed for factors on higher levels of analysis.
In his previous work on cohesion, King has argued that the professionalization of the Western armed forces during the 20th and 21st century has diminished the importance of macrolevel factors like ethnonationalism for combat performance (Siebold et al., 2016, p. 9; see also King, 2013, p. 424):

Because of their generally inadequate training, citizen infantries performed poorly in combat, relying on primary group solidarity and political motivation to encourage their troops. By contrast, professional militaries have often been able to generate coordinated combat teams that are able to perform their collective drills in battle due to intense training.

In his reply, King seems to want to have it both ways. While he now describes training and drill as “primary independent variables in explaining combat performance,” he also sees that combat performance depends on both microlevel training and drill and macrolevel ethnonationalism (King, 2020, pp. 5, 7). This leaves the relationship between the two unclear and raises crucial questions absent in The Combat Soldier. Can effective professional training and drill still replace the influence of ethnonationalism as suggested in The Combat Soldier and the citation above, or do training and drill depend on ethnonationalism? Are microlevel or macrolevel factors more important for combat performance?

King does not appear to recognize the possibility that the macrolevel factors he mentions are narrowly ethnonationalist and particular to the Western context, not universal. It is a limitation for any broader application of The Combat Soldier that it suggests no alternatives for ethnonationalism. Does this mean that it is only ethnonationalism that matters on the macrolevel and that ethnonationalism cannot be replaced by other kinds of variables? Even further, if train and drill depend on ethnonationalism, how do they work in non-Western contexts where this kind of ethnonationalism is absent?

I have repeatedly cautioned about the dangers of taking Western concepts as absolutes and Western realities as starting points for analysis. Such assumptions in other cases risk muddying rather than furthering our understanding (Käähkö, 2017, p. 57). Military professionalism—one of the central concepts in The Combat Soldier—offers a case in point. The narrative of professionalization offered in The Combat Soldier is thoroughly Western. Military professionalism relies on the political structure and motivation that comes with the Western state. It is in this context military professionalism can downplay societal influences. As commonly perceived in the West and as elaborated in a previous piece cited by King, “the term ‘military’ alone suggests a specifically modern relationship between an armed group and a state, as well as with civilians” (Käähkö & Haldén, 2020, p. 520). Striving toward professionalization, Clausewitz famously separated the general and his army from the government and the people in his “wonderful trinity” (Clausewitz, 2004, p. 19). Later views of military professionalism have continued to emphasize the subordinate separation of the military from democratic civilian politics to the extent possible
(Huntington, 1957). Concepts like military professionalism come with many assumptions not necessarily applicable elsewhere. Like with other concepts, cohesion must be understood in its own context, and from the premises prevailing in that context, not ours. Investigating cohesion on micro-, meso-, and macrolevel alike appears as a way to do this in practice.

I agree with King’s (2020) view that every inquiry must limit its scope (p. 6). It is consequently surprising that he defends his work in a manner that appears to maintain its claim to universal validity. This is not what he did in The Combat Soldier, where he wrote that the book “does not claim to provide a universal account of cohesion in combat. On the contrary, it deliberately focuses on the smallest autonomous military unit in the modern army: the platoon, a group of approximately thirty to forty soldiers” (King, 2013, p. 15) and that “by focusing exclusively on the major western powers, the findings of this study are perforce limited” (King, 2013, pp. 20–21, also quoted in King, 2020, p. 6). This limited scope contributed to the call for broadening the study of cohesion. What appears a reversal on this point leaves me puzzled. I do not feel that these limitations diminish the worth of The Combat Soldier in what it sought to do when first published. The limitations of its explanatory power, however, become clear when King tries to apply it to a much broader range of cases. This is illustrated in the second part of this article.

The second and more important reason why the special issue did not engage deeply with King’s work has to do with his definition of cohesion. King understands cohesion to refer not to “the interpersonal bonds between the troops (crucial though they were to motivation) but to combat performance itself” (King, 2020, p. 3, see also King, 2013, p. 36). I in turn understand cohesion as the glue that makes combatants stay together beyond combat. While many previous studies have focused on Western armed forces and the microlevel, as noted above I find this insufficient with other cases where assumptions about other variables might lead us astray. As a result, the broadening of the perspective necessitates higher levels of analysis. Focusing on combat performance on the tactical microlevel, King’s understanding of cohesion is thus very different from mine. In effect, we are discussing different things.

The next part of this article explains why King’s definition of cohesion is difficult to apply in my own studies. The article concludes with a plea for truly interdisciplinary future studies of war on which depends our understanding of cohesion, among other things.

Combat Performance and Cohesion

The first reason why I feel King’s focus on combat performance is difficult to apply in my own studies is empirical. For instance, how do we measure combat performance? How can we isolate material factors such as manpower and technology that may not directly depend on cohesion, but which still affect combat performance? Considering that much information about even contemporary combat war that concerns
Western forces is censored and difficult to access, how do we acquire these data in poorly documented and historical cases? I find each of these issues intractable with cases like Liberia, the topic of my PhD research (Käihkö, 2016). *The Combat Soldier* lacks clear answers to these kinds of questions.

The second reason is conceptual. Even if I were able to solve these data issues, how would combat efficiency further our understanding of armed groups in Liberia, and especially of their fate after the war? I feel the answer is bound to be not much. This is suggested even by King’s attempt to use one of my previous studies of what he calls “Government of Liberia Army” in support of *The Combat Soldier*. No entity called the Government of Liberia Army has ever existed. The majority of those who fought for Charles Taylor during his presidency were hardly “soldiers,” nor constituted an “army” (King, 2020, p. 7): They belonged to a loose umbrella group of contracted militias that fought for money rather than ideology (Käihkö, 2017). King’s account of my study exemplifies the risk of superimposing our realities on others, discussed earlier. It is ultimately this kind of use of Western concepts as absolutes that paves way for theories that I believe make questionable claims of universal applicability.

As King acknowledges in his treatment of my study of the Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU)—a paramilitary unit established by the former rebel leader Charles Taylor after he won the presidential elections in 1997—professional training and drill offer insufficient explanations for its battlefield performance (King, 2020, p. 7). As I note, many who had served in the ATU or in Taylor’s government openly admitted, Taylor had paid them [the ATU] too much. As they were already enjoying the benefits brought by inclusion, they saw little reason to risk it all by going to the front lines. (Käihkö, 2017, p. 64)

In other words, while the ATU was likely the best trained of all Liberian armed groups at the time, it was simultaneously among the least interested in fighting. To put this in the terminology of *The Combat Soldier*, despite training and drill, there was little combat performance. It appears inconceivable that training and drill constituted the primary independent variables in the case of the ATU.

King’s (2020) retort that the ATU’s poor combat performance can be explained by its lacking “political motivation, primary group solidarity, or training” (p. 7) suggests that he too recognizes the problem. Yet one wonders whether this broadening of his past argument now elevates political motivation and primary group solidarity to equal explanatory strength previously enjoyed by training alone. The alternative is that training is still of supreme importance, but that it in turn depends on factors specific to the 21st-century Western context *The Combat Soldier* focuses on. Whatever the case, the ATU had superior training and probably also enjoyed most primary group solidarity, the superior variant of which *The Combat Soldier* in any case links to training (King, 2013, p. 338). The kind of ethnonationalist motive discussed in *The Combat Soldier* was in turn lacking in all Liberian armed groups at the time (for the
Government of Liberia forces, see Kääkö, 2017, p. 61). The ATU was thus superior in two of the three variables mentioned by King and neither better nor worse in the third. Even these three variables do not explain its poor combat performance.

Beyond Liberia, I wonder whether the case is very different with the Western-trained Afghan and Iraqi forces, in which we invested tens of billions of dollars. Despite all their professional Western-type training and drill, why have these forces performed so poorly against their opponents, which likely have received less training? Not that this problem is novel. For instance, in 1961 President Eisenhower lamented, “the Communist influence on Chinese troops, pointing out their ability to get much higher morale among the under-developed peoples [sic] than seemed to be the case of the Western Allies” (quoted in Westad, 2018, p. 231). Nevertheless, these empirical cases, as well as King’s broadening of his argument, suggest that there is more at play here than mere tactical-level combat performance emphasized in *The Combat Soldier*.

One conceivable explanation to this conundrum comes from our repeated attempts to shape foreign forces in our own image in ways not necessarily appropriate to other contexts (Kääkö, 2018d). Even King’s definition of cohesion is rather Clausewitzian in the sense that it emphasizes the centrality of violence to war. While there are valid reasons for doing so, this kind of emphasis on violence may itself be criticized as modern (Honig, 2012, 2017), if not Eurocentric (Kääkö, 2018b). My main worry is that emphasis on microlevel tactics at the cost of macrolevel strategy may lead us to a situation not unlike that witnessed in Vietnam—and also Afghanistan and Iraq, the main cases investigated in *The Combat Soldier* (King, 2013, p. 22): While the United States and its allies inflicted terrible losses on their opponents, they still lost these wars. This quandary was famously observed by Colonel Harry Summers who repeated the pithy answer by his North Vietnamese counterpart Colonel Tu in 1975 to the claim that the Americans were never defeated on the battlefield: “That may be so, … but it is also irrelevant” (Summers, 1982, p. 1). By extension, can the narrow focus on tactical-level combat performance too risk irrelevancy in these kinds of conflicts, where an armed group’s ability to stick together and endure beyond combat and remain active in a broader sociopolitical sphere appears more important than the capacity to inflict physical pain?

None of this means that tactical microlevel cohesion, however defined, is unimportant or that my aim was a “theoretical rebuttal” of King’s (2020) previous work on cohesion (p. 8). I nevertheless stand firm on my view that the study of cohesion deserves broadening, something King misses because he has not previously picked up on the potential problems with his variables. Like most studies of cohesion, *The Combat Soldier* concentrates on a specific Western (and from a Nordic perspective an Anglo-American—witness our continuation of conscription alone) context. King’s specific definition of cohesion means that *The Combat Soldier* offers a doubly narrow view of the concept. Overall, it appears unwise to focus on the microlevel to the extent that what could be called strategic cohesion is ignored (see Honig, 2015), and far from alone because of the warnings that count widening societal divisions among the gravest threats we currently face (Fridman, 2018).
A Plea for Interdisciplinarity

In conclusion, I want to acknowledge the important influence of the workshop participants whose contributions did not make it into the special issue and which as a result are not readily available for those not present. I suspect that one reason for this is that these scholars work outside the social sciences in disciplines such as anthropology and history, where writing does not necessarily conform to the norms and established paradigms of social science research. Contributions that would have strengthened the challenge to existing views included one that explicitly made the argument about the importance of strategic cohesion (Honig, 2015) and another that described how an armed group broke off from the surrounding society to form its own “parallel universe” (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2015). I worry that strict boundaries between academic disciplines can stifle much-needed interdisciplinary discussion necessary for understanding such complex issues as cohesion, and especially for future efforts to broaden the field toward the study of strategic sociopolitical context.

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ORCID iD

Ilmari Käihkö https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0462-6679

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Author Biographies

Ilmari Käihkö is an assistant professor at the Department of Security, Strategy and Leadership, Swedish Defence University, and a veteran of the Finnish Defence Forces. His research focuses on creation, control and use of force, and the conflict ethnography used to study these topics.