



Security Nexus Perspectives

RELIGION IN A VALUES-BASED APPROACH TO STRATEGIC COMPETITION

By Dr. Alfred Oehlers *

We speak often of a values-based approach to strategic competition. In so doing, we usually operate within a mental frame that privileges familiar political and economic values such as those associated with our democratic political systems and practices, and our liberal market-led approaches to economic organization. Less often do we draw attention to the place of religious faiths and beliefs within our value systems. In a context of strategic competition, this omission potentially denies us an opportunity to more strongly differentiate and distinguish ourselves from competitor regimes. More, we may be overlooking potentially productive avenues to strengthen relationships with our security partners.

The lower profile of religious faiths and beliefs in our current values-based approach might be attributed to several considerations. Constitutional and political considerations as well as broader evolving socio-cultural mores in the United States (U.S.) are certainly important factors to bear in mind. Certainly, on the Defense side of things, there are important legislative and policy requirements delimiting the boundaries within which religious faiths and beliefs may figure. Heightened sensitivities around the War on Terror and its religious ramifications might also have played some role, contributing to a wider reticence to silhouette a potentially divisive issue.

Drawing a connection between religion and national security is certainly nothing novel (for efforts under the Obama Administration linking religion to the National Security Strategy, see e.g. Lucius 2013). As we transition towards a geopolitical moment characterized by Great Power Competition and strategic maneuvering, we may wish to further revisit such thinking around religious faiths and beliefs. Indicative of such rethinking, the State Department has been leading recent attempts to elevate the prominence of religions and connect engagement on this topic to broader objectives in strategic competition. In February this year, it spearheaded the formation of the International Religious Freedom Alliance (see e.g. U.S. Department of State 2020). Bringing together like-minded nations to protect religious freedom, the

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Alliance - more crucially - highlights shared commitments to tolerance, openness and freedom, drawing a sharp contrast with authoritarian regimes around the world practicing persecution and prohibition.

Building on this initiative, it will be interesting to explore from a Defense perspective, if there is anything we might offer in support of the State Department – further sharpening the contrast with authoritarian regimes and rendering more compelling the case for freedom and openness. In conjunction, and at a more practical level speaking specifically to Defense interests, it might also be useful to consider better ways to harness the potential of religious faiths and beliefs as an additional element in a values-based approach strengthening security relationships and engagement with partner nations. Granted, we need to tread carefully, bearing in mind the constitutional, legislative and policy parameters mentioned previously. Special attention will be needed addressing potential sensitivities of our partners, particularly potential impacts on non-Christian allies and partners, and any risks inflaming existing religious divides. But even allowing for all this, can we bring religious faiths and beliefs to bear in our strategic competition – an area where our authoritarian competitors are singularly ill-disposed to counter?

Reaction may be mixed to the following observation. Arguably, the U.S. offers one of the better examples around the world of how a commitment to individual rights and freedoms may coexist within a military entrusted with the defense of a nation without compromising military discipline, command and control, and while remaining accountable to democratically elected civilian representatives. Just pause and think about this for a moment and the remarkable feat it represents. It is something to be proud of, but also, certainly something to highlight as a contrast to competitor regimes. How respect for an individual's beliefs, faith or religion is upheld alongside the needs of a modern military, is a story to be shared far more frequently by our senior military leaders. To be sure, it is not an unblemished story, but therein too is another valuable message to be conveyed about the resilience of free and open systems. Crafted carefully and told well, the experience of our military can be a particularly salient addition to the broader narrative around values and strategic competition, especially when juxtaposed against a peer competitor such as the People's Republic of China and the People's Liberation Army.

From a more practical Defense standpoint, religious faiths and beliefs may also prove helpful in establishing and reinforcing relationships with security partners around the world. Mirroring an increasing diversity among our military personnel, the representation of faiths among our Chaplain Corps has similarly grown considerably, and now includes a sizable sample of world faiths. This undoubtedly is a significant resource supporting the spiritual, wellness and morale needs of our service personnel. But it is also a tremendous asset to be harnessed by Commanders as they develop and execute engagements around the world. Our Chaplain Corps is uniquely placed to advise on additional elements of engagement that will distinguish a U.S. values-based initiative. Much more than just a "standard" military engagement involving personnel, hardware, exercises and the like (which, frankly, is increasingly within reach of our peer competitors to mimic) we have the opportunity to develop deeper and more robust relationships with our security partners, on a qualitatively higher plane, above and beyond the reach of our competitors.

Issues involving the intersection of religious faith and beliefs with secular notions of national identity, unity and defense, are not unique to the U.S. In nearly every partner nation and military we engage with, similar issues are often grappled with, typically with highly consequential implications for national and wider

regional security. Taking the Indo-Pacific as an example, history is littered with instances where a reconciliation of such values failed, with disastrous consequences. In many partners that have succeeded in reconciling such tensions, moreover, deep-seated divisions continue to linger, vulnerable to provocation during a future crisis or the malign interventions of external state and non-state actors. We miss an opportunity to contribute to the development of a deeper resilience in our partner nations and militaries if we do not raise such issues during our interactions. Again, acknowledging all relevant parameters and sensitivities, a frank discussion of our own eventful (and imperfect) journey seeking to reconcile these issues and our continuing efforts crafting a supporting edifice of legislation, policy and processes, can yield valuable dividends. By openly airing our own experience, we lend encouragement and support to address what often appear to be insurmountable challenges. Thinking may also be stimulated, potentially inspiring enhancements at a higher-order governance level through to tactical units and their needs. A platform of trust and understanding is also established, going far deeper to the very core values of our partner nations and militaries, and guided by broadly similar democratic rules-based adjudication and processes. Most powerfully, we together develop an alternative grounded in our shared histories of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity, distinct from peer competitors ruled by diktat, ruthlessly enforced uniformity, and an unquestioning allegiance to an ideology, political party, and individual.

Of course, to realize potentials such as those described above, change has to come, and probably none more so than in some reconceptualization of the place and role of religious faiths and beliefs within our Defense mission. Entrusted primarily to our Chaplain Corps, this historically has largely been crafted as an inward-looking support function, catering to the needs of service personnel as they pursue their professional responsibilities. While this support role will likely remain central, the demands of strategic competition may imply more will be asked of our Chaplain Corps, for example, by way of advice and guidance as we seek to develop more compelling values-led alternatives to peer competitors. Whether this might be satisfied under current guidance and doctrine allowing for religious affairs advisement relating to the immediate area of military operations concerned, may be a question needing attention (see e.g. U.S. Department of Defense 2018 and U.S. Department of the Army 2019).

This subtle adjustment in mission and tasking will need to be accompanied by a potentially more challenging shift in organizational culture and mindset, ingrained with long-established notions of the limits relating to religious and faith-related matters, and even the perceived roles of Chaplains. Additionally, commensurate with expanding expectations of the Chaplain Corps, it will be highly likely a re-skilling and up-skilling of the Corps will need to be pursued to assist Chaplains honing their understanding of the rapidly evolving and complex strategic context, and most crucially, relating their valuable perspectives to refining our approaches to strategic competition.

The above barely scratches the surface of issues and discussions that must be traversed if we are to more deliberately contemplate a Defense approach harnessing religious faiths and beliefs in strategic competition. These conversations will be at times sensitive, controversial and challenging, but nonetheless worth having, as they center on a critical point of distinction between the U.S. and peer competitors, and exploit a key vulnerability of the latter. And these are conversations that need not be confined to just the U.S. Defense establishment. In fact, to the extent these are issues shared among allies and like-minded security partners (with reference to Australia, see e.g., Black 2018), there is huge value to be gained in

pooling experiences, insights and perspectives on the way forward, and developing broadly congruent strategies collectively supporting shared values of freedom and openness. What our competitors lack is precisely such dense networks of international partners; all the better if one can be evolved focused around a unique advantage we share.

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