

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because Social Science Research and Education Are Critical for National Security

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Each of the social sciences contributes irreplaceable content knowledge and methodologies to our collective understanding of other political entities and the social norms underlying their intentions toward the United States. It is a rather harsh truth that as long as the United States remains a global power, the nation will have to work specifically to maintain national security—not only in order to retain power, but because both our allies and our adversaries rely on it. To a certain extent, our national security is maintained through deterrence—in the sheer fact that we possess certain capabilities and engage internationally.

Since we cannot step away from the intelligence and analysis that underscores our international engagement, we must confront the reality that we will undertake national-security efforts with greater or lesser expertise and wisdom. The social sciences are what we use to make sense of international relations. Warfare and peacekeeping are fundamentally social, human activities, and the resources at stake in both are also essentially social: physical resources for survival, political identity, institutional prestige and influence, and shared ideation and values.

There are two groups that are skeptical that social science is a necessary component of national security efforts: some members of the government and some members of the social sciences. The first group may see social science as “soft,” “squishy,” or [incomplete](#),

without generalizable implications. The second group may see engagement in national security interests as synonymous with the weaponization of knowledge and the erosion of professional ethics.

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Both of these premises oversimplify the situation. As COSSA affiliates know, there is nothing soft about social science. More finely articulated and rigorously applied quantitative methods are always being developed across the social sciences: we know more about humans in general even as we discover ways to account for individual differences. Methods of collecting large amounts of data and synthesizing it into [models and simulations](#) are being used in every social science. These methods complement rather than replace traditionally qualitative, humanistic methods of discovering cognitive, cultural, and behavioral tendencies that characterize societies. In this era of Big Data, social science methods are converging on the methods of the physical sciences, and the lack of simple answers is due not to the weakness of the research methods, but to the complexity of the subject matter. The more Big Data we have, the more we need human analysts, because without humans to examine the models and interpret how the results connect to the actual world, the data never rises to the level of information, much less knowledge to inform policy and political action.

I want to turn to the other population of skeptics: colleagues in the social sciences. Serving the national security interest

is not equivalent to weaponizing expertise. National security can be achieved through means other than warfare and espionage, such as diplomacy and covert influence—activities that do not presuppose an adversarial relationship. It is true that in my time at the Center for Advanced Study of Language, I have encountered people from the government who think of national security in adversarial terms—an “us vs. them,” zero-sum approach to domestic protection. More frequently, however, I have encountered efforts to provide greater safety to everyone involved in an intelligence effort, American or otherwise: strategies that are crafted and monitored by thoughtful intellectuals whose concern is to prevent unnecessary harm. Personally, my research could as well have been supported by the National Science Foundation’s Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate—if it were not so constrained by tight budgets—and I have, in fact, been reassured that lives have been saved as a result of our efforts.

Of course, I have not heard about deaths that may have been facilitated by our research. Social scientists cannot prevent the conduct of war or the deaths that result. We must therefore acknowledge that replacing empirically-founded aggregated understanding of social trends with impulse-based reactivity is likely to result in egregious and deadly errors. There is no virtue in social scientists’ abdicating their responsibilities in the service of US interests, because such abdication will only degrade the quality, sophistication, and nuance deployed by the US in its requisite engagements. For social scientists to refuse to be collaborators in national security efforts additionally cements the anti-intellectual prejudice of many government actors, that our work is self-indulgent rather than oriented toward the public good.

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The defense of social science for the public good has to be fierce and sustained. Several research scientist positions at the Center for Advanced study of Language, including my own, will end this month, because our funding is being directed away from social science research in language, culture, and cognition. A sad part of the story of social science engagement in US national security is that the government’s recognition of our value is sometimes short-lived and tactical rather than strategic. Beyond its intrinsic value in giving us agency in global equilibrium, applying social science to national security may be the best way to ensure that the government and, perhaps, someday, the public as a whole, will value the role of the social sciences in reclaiming our global intellectual domination, not just maintaining our political domination.

Why Social Science? Social science is critical for national security because without the perspective of the social sciences, our technological and informational advancement can do nothing to maintain our stance and status.



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