

Building Experts: Re-Thinking the PCS Cycle for Army Intelligence Soldiers

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Picture this: it is 2028, and China is conducting a buildup of People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces in Fujian province. To the inexpert eye, this appears to be preparations for the PLA's annual JOINT SWORD exercise; the buildup of personnel and equipment in strategic areas could easily be mistaken for a precursor to the exercise. However, United States Army intelligence analysts aligned to INDOPACOM missed several key tip-offs that would have identified changes to the normal JOINT SWORD exercise. Analysts missed several key factors, including increased activity in factories that create strategic stockpiles of ammunition, increased logistical supplies flowing down towards the Fujian province outside the requirements for exercise, decreased Chinese civilian trade vessel traffic in the Taiwan Strait, military units moving to the area that normally do not participate in JOINT SWORD, and increased fuel stockpiles in areas within easy reach of the coast outside of the normal requirements. When looked at individually, there is nothing concerning; when viewed holistically by an expert in PLA patterns, it becomes very clear that this activity is outside the range of normal, even during an exercise period. Unfortunately, analysts miss these signs due to a lack of subject-matter expertise. The United States does not have sufficient early warning to deploy troops to the area, resulting in Taiwan being taken by China. China now looks to continue locking down control of the South China Sea area and shifts its eye toward the Philippines.

While the scenario above is fictitious, it is not unlikely. The United States Army is a complex and diverse organization that must rapidly adapt to meet the changing needs of the operational environment, from Counterinsurgency Operations in the Middle East to large-scale combat operations in the South China Sea. For military intelligence, however, the stakes are particularly high: failing to professionalize analysts and build subject matter experts directly undermines the Army's ability to anticipate and counter threats. Building true expertise is not a process that can be rushed; it requires a long-term investment in on-the-job training and a focused, sustained effort in a specific area of operations. Researchers across various fields agree that building subject-matter expertise takes around 10,000 hours, or 10 years, of dedicated and deliberate practice (Carter, 2014). However, the Army's three-year Permanent Change of Station (PCS) cycle falls short, preventing analysts from developing a deep understanding of a Combatant Command's threat picture. To maintain a decisive intelligence advantage, the military must fundamentally re-evaluate and modernize how it develops expertise, moving away from the short-term PCS model and instead building enduring, specialized knowledge in the nation's most critical threat areas.

To measure a military intelligence professional's capability and determine whether they are an expert, we must first define what a military intelligence expert must know, be, and do. Per DA PAM 600-3-20, an intelligence professional must understand the land, maritime, air, space, and cyberspace domains and include considerations from the human, information, and physical dimensions to describe current and future threats. They must understand how politics, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time (PMESII-PT) operational variables may impact the environment and factor that into their intelligence analysis. Perhaps most importantly, they must have intimate knowledge of the enemy's equipment, military structure, leadership styles, decision-making styles, and way of fighting, both on offense and defense, throughout the full spectrum of military operations. They must learn to collaborate effectively with other intelligence professionals and with other war-fighting functions, understanding what each discipline contributes to the fight. They must be able to synthesize intelligence reporting and provide oral briefings to their customers based on their intelligence production (DA PAM 600-3-20, 2025).

Now that we have described the skills required of a military intelligence professional and subject matter expert, it is important to understand how a Soldier gains this knowledge. While Soldiers understand the basics of generalized intelligence analysis after several months in Advanced Individual Training, the Army must provide significant theater- or unit-specific training tailored to their requirements once the Soldier arrives at their duty station (Ceder, 2024). Soldiers continue to gain significant critical knowledge throughout their time at a duty station. Still, three years is not enough time to build expertise in all aspects of their area of operations.

A junior Military Intelligence Soldier in year three of a PCS cycle is just becoming competent and confident in a specific target set. They are nowhere near the 10,000 hours that many experts say are required to develop subject-matter expertise (Carter, 2014). While 10,000 hours is an oversimplification of the requirements to build an expert, we know that building expertise requires significant time investment, is guided by an expert, coach, or mentor, and is focused and deliberate. Of course, even then, creating an expert is not guaranteed; intellect and effort are also part of the equation. However, we do know that 10,000 hours is a baseline estimate for building expertise, which exceeds the time an intelligence Soldier spends at a given duty station (Miller, 2022). When their three-year time period at a station is up, the Soldier often has to shift to a completely different theater and target set. At that point, their subject matter knowledge is reset, and they are at the beginning of a learning cycle again. While the basics of intelligence analysis remain the same, transitioning to a new target set is akin to starting at zero and relearning the background knowledge needed for that target. This trend sets intelligence professionals up for failure at a time when the Army critically needs expertise.

The Army has identified this subject-matter expertise gap and is taking steps to close it, as recent evidence demonstrates. First, they are creating courses and certifications, such as the Personnel Development Skill Identifier (PDSI) P2E given to personnel in Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), to build a nuanced understanding of the main threats in an Area of Responsibility (AOR) (Gray, 2024). For certain locations, such as South Korea, they are also extending the time on station from one year to two years for certain intelligence Military Occupational Specialties (MOS), such as 35N (Signals Intelligence Analyst) or 35L (Counterintelligence Analyst). The Army changed the policy because these MOSs require extensive training and certifications to become fully mission-capable (Ceder, 2024). While the extension aimed to reduce turnover in positions that require significant training upon arrival, it also shows that the Army recognizes that normal PCS cycles are insufficient to develop the needed expertise. The Pentagon also drafted a memo to the services in 2025, asking each service to identify solutions to keep Service Members at duty stations longer, citing one benefit: building specialists rather than generalists within the ranks (Nieberg, 2025). Additionally, the Army is implementing the Fiscal Year 2027 Warrant Officer Retention & eXcellence (WORX) - Stabilize initiative to provide expertise and stability within units. This Warrant Officer-specific stability option allows Warrant Officers in multiple intelligence MOSs (and other technical fields) to remain at a duty station for two to three extra years, emphasizing expertise retention as a key driver (Army Human Resources Command, 2026).

Although the Army has begun taking incremental steps toward extending personnel assignments, it has yet to enact the sweeping policy changes required to meet today's operational demands. The growing complexity and speed of global threats demand a bold shift: the Army must abandon the outdated three-year PCS cycle for its intelligence analysts and instead cultivate deep, AOR-specific expertise. This transformation requires keeping analysts focused on a single AOR for 8 to 10 years, as only sustained engagement at this level allows the development of true subject-matter experts. Army leaders can achieve this without stagnating career progression by rotating roles within the same command or target set, but the critical factor is maintaining continuity within the same AOR. Anything less risks leaving the United States unprepared in future crises.

With our current fiscally constrained budgets, a byproduct of keeping them at the same duty station is saving the military (and the Soldiers' families) thousands of dollars per Soldier PCS (The Real Cost

of Moving, 2020). A 2020 survey found that families who PCSed to a new duty station incurred about \$5,000 in out-of-pocket costs. The military PCS cycle is also tied to higher spouse unemployment and loss of income, increased psychological stress in romantic partners, and increased eating disorders in children. Keeping families at a single duty station would lead to greater financial stability and happier, more resilient family members (Kupper, 2025). This would also provide a direct benefit to the Commander, as happier families enable warfighters to focus more of their attention on their mission requirements and positively affect Soldier retention numbers.

Now let's reimagine the initial China scenario. This time, a seasoned intelligence expert armed with years of experience tracking Chinese troop movements and exercises quickly identifies the subtle but critical deviations from routine activity. The expert raises the alarm, giving decision-makers the time and clarity needed to respond effectively and potentially avert a crisis. This is not a subject for debate; it is a necessity for national security. The Army's expectations for its intelligence analysts must match the operational realities of today's threats. Building true experts demands significant changes to PCS procedures and a commitment to long-term specialization. The advantages are clear: deeper knowledge within AORs, cost savings for the Army and families, stronger family resilience, and improved Soldier retention. Most importantly, only by extending analysts' time on target will the Army develop the expertise needed to protect US interests in an increasingly dangerous world.

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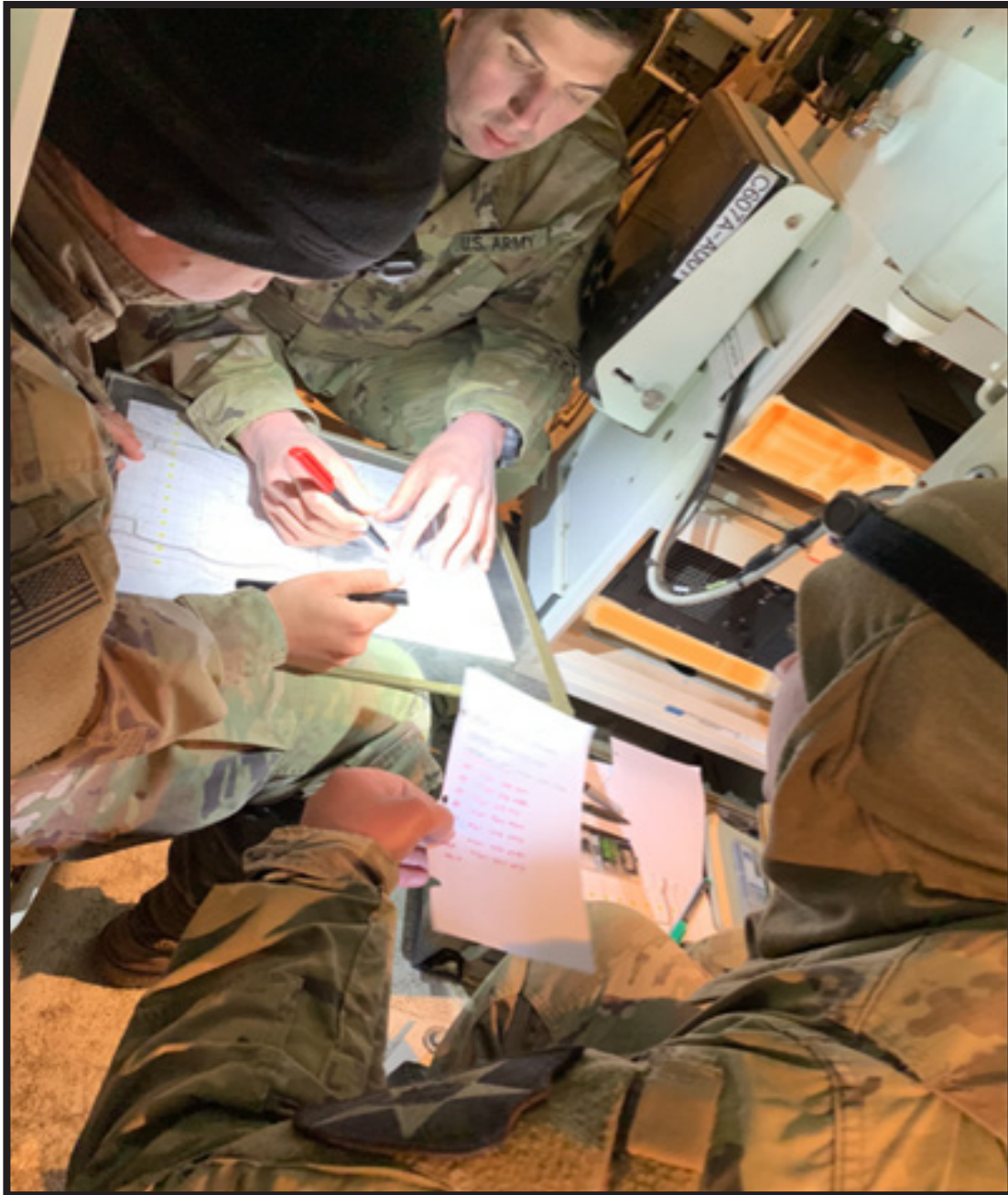


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